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First Contact

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YOU KNOW… WHO

Keith Tudor, email As someone who grew up watching new episodes of *Doctor Who* in the 1980s, Jodie Whittaker's finale was an absolute treat. I loved seeing the classic Doctors reprising their roles alongside Tegan and Ace. A great send off for her and she's gone out on a high. An episode crammed with so much could've cheapened her exit, but a great performance saved it. She will be missed, but with that regeneration cliffhanger the future is looking bright for the next season.

Rob Graham, email I had a lump in my throat in the final scenes, especially with the classic series companions meeting Graham, Yaz and Dan. Can't help feeling that bringing back the classic series Doctors could have and should have been done in the 50th anniversary special, though I get the feeling there could be more appearances and surprises in the 60th anniversary specials.

BITE-SIZED FACTS

Rockula, email With regard to your article on vampires in cinema [*SFX* 358] can I offer a small correction? You state that Mexico's *El Vampiro* (1957) was "the first film to give the creatures elongated canines". That honour actually goes to *Drakula İstanbul'da* (*Dracula In Instanbul*), a 1953 release from Turkey. It was the first sound screen version that shows Dracula with fangs. It was also the first to show him scaling down walls, the first where he offers a newborn baby to his female vampire and the first version that directly links Count Dracula and Vlad "The Impaler" Tepes.

Rik Laan, email Just read the feature on vampires in cinema. What about the *Underworld* franchise? We need Selene!

SFX: *Believe us, we only had so many pointy sticks and cloves of garlic to go round!*

On Danny Boyle's plan for a *28 Days Later* sequel: We've only got to wait eight years for *28 Years Later*!

Neil Bestwick

Netflix and DC need to work out a custody share agreement because we need to have Henry Cavill as both Superman and The Witcher.

@NVGhost005

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Future PLC, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Editor
Darren Scott **(DS)**
darren.scott@futurenet.com

Deputy Editor
Ian Berriman **(IB)**
ian.berriman@futurenet.com

Art Editor
Jonathan Coates
jonathan.coates@futurenet.com

Production Editor
Ed Ricketts
ed.ricketts@futurenet.com

Editor-at-large
Nick Setchfield **(NS)**

US Editor
Tara Bennett **(TB)**

Contributors
Saxon Bullock, Bryan Cairns, Sarah Dobbs, Rhian Drinkwater, Robbie Dunlop, Richard Edwards, Dave Golder, Stephen Jewell (SJ), Luke Kemp, Catherine Kirkpatrick (Art Editor), Leila Latif, Matt Maytum (MM), James Mottram (JM), Jayne Nelson, Steve O'Brien (SO), Oliver Pfeiffer, Will Salmon, Mark Samuels, Neil Smith, David West, Jonathan Wright

Film Group, London
Group Editor-in-Chief
Jane Crowther
Group Art Director
Paul Breckenridge
Deputy Editor Matt Maytum
Art Editor Mike Brennan
Reviews Editor Matthew Leyland
News Editor Jordan Farley

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Advertising
Media packs available on request
Commercial Director Clare Dove
clare.dove@futurenet.com
Advertising Manager Simon Rawle
simon.rawle@futurenet.com
01225 687694
Account Manager Nick Hayes
nick.hayes@futurenet.com
01225 687236

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Craig Niven
Circulation
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Production
Head of Production Mark Constance
Production Project Manager
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Jason Hudson
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Management
Managing Director, Games and Ents
Matthew Pierce
Design Director
Simon Maynard
Head of Art & Design
Rodney Dive
Director of Group Finance
Oli Foster

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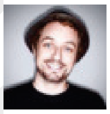
Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind



DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES
→ Absolutely *loved The Devil's Hour*. It felt like it towered above much of recent television.
→ Marvel's *Predator* comics are excellent, even better than their *Alien* ones.
→ Really enjoying *Cabinet Of Curiosities* – some proper good scares!

RANTS
→ I haven't had time to watch *Andor* past episode four, so of course it's the one everyone's raving about!

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES
→ I'm (whispers) a *Star Wars* agnostic, but I'm loving *Andor*. Who'd have thought fascist team meetings could be so gripping?
→ Still pinching myself that RTD brought back *Doctor Who*'s classic diamond logo. It's never been bettered.
→ Since reading "The Willows" (see page 22) I've been hunting down readings by Algernon Blackwood (like bit.ly/blackwoodreading).
→ Trash fans! Long-time *SFX* contributor Sam Ashurst has launched a new podcast, VHS Quest (bit.ly/VHSquest).

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES
→ As a big fan of the original *The Wicker Man* the thought of the dreadful Nic Cage remake makes me want to volunteer to be Summerisle's next victim. Even so, I'm intrigued by the news of a Howard Overman TV series. If he can do for *The Wicker Man* what Lisa Joy and Jonathan Nolan did for *Westworld*, it could be pretty amazing!

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES
→ Really pleased to see (some of) the original *Ghost Stories For Christmas* out on Blu-ray at last. More HD discs like this, please! So much BBC TV content is only ever released on the ancient DVD format.

RANTS
→ I'm so OUTRAGED that *Westworld* won't get a season five that I'm starting a petition and DEMANDING that everyone at HBO is FIRED. I mean, that's definitely how these things work, isn't it?

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES
→ Sometimes *Andor* can feel like a thought experiment – what would *Star Wars* be like with all the fun taken out? But there's clearly room for all tones in that galaxy far, far away…
→ Intrigued by rumblings of an *Indiana Jones* TV series. Just please no "Raiders Of The Treaty Of Versailles" like the old one.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES
→ *Andor* absolutely knocked it out of the park. Best storytelling since *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Rogue One*. Bring on season two!
→ *1899* is an addictive series that dragged me in all the way. Give it a try.

"It's gonna be a hot time in the cold town tonight."

Captain's Log

You know you're getting old when you talk about how it only feels like yesterday since it was Christmas and question where the year has gone… So I won't do that, but instead reflect on how 2022 was a marked improvement on the two years prior, and marvel at how blessed we've been in terms of new sci-fi, fantasy and horror across a number of different platforms.

In fact, I feel like I'll need this festive season to catch up on everything before it all starts again! That is, of course, after I've done a rewatch of all the BBC classic *A Ghost Story For Christmas* episodes – *SFX* was the only magazine on set for filming of Mark Gatiss's latest instalment (pictured above), which you can read all about in this issue. Because the series is so iconic, it feels particularly special to have visited the set of three of them now, as well as strange to consider these will be something discussed long after we're gone. How's that for ghostly?

Some Christmas traditions last forever, but over time they evolve in new ways – just check out *Violent Night* if you don't believe me. Attending the premiere at New York Comic Con was truly brilliant – the crowd absolutely loved it and I laughed till I ached, while occasionally having to peek through my fingers. Hopefully any festivities we experience over the coming weeks won't be *quite* as full on! Happy holidays and we'll see you in 2023 for even more adventures.

Darren
x

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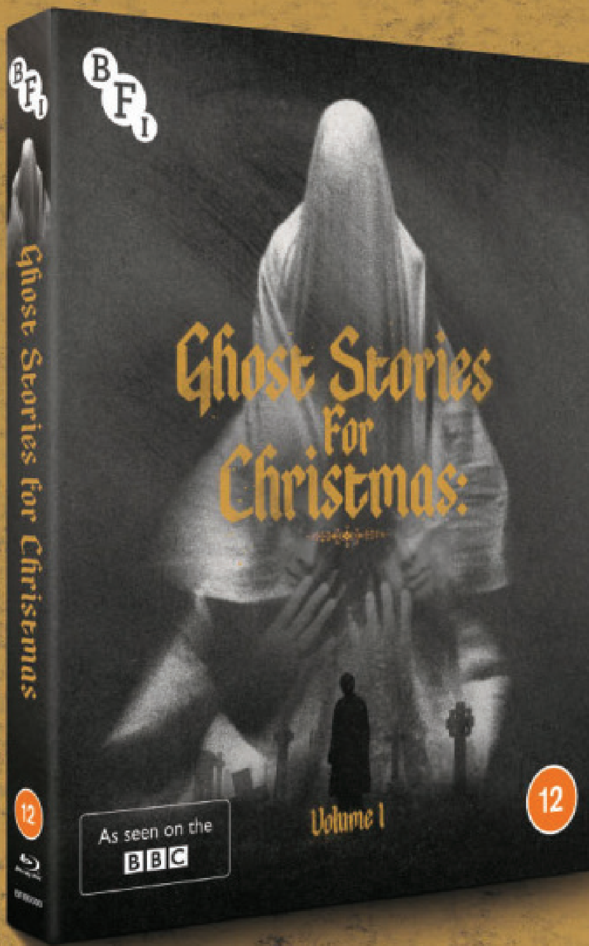
The Guardian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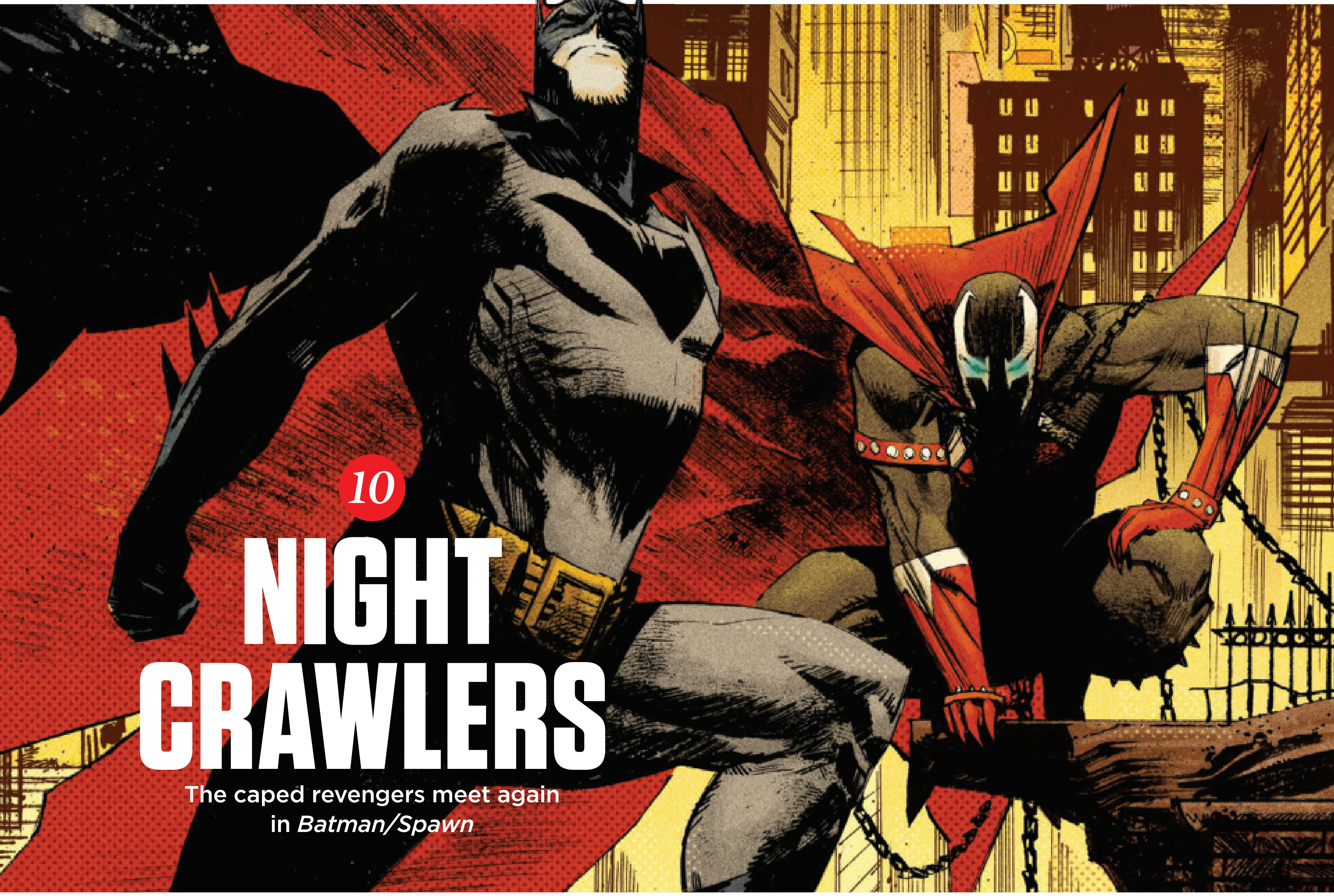

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NIGHT CRAWLERS

The caped revengers meet again in *Batman/Spawn*

Highlights

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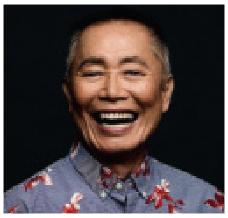
PINOCCHIO

→ Guillermo del Toro finally made a version of the film for adults. No wait, not like *that*.



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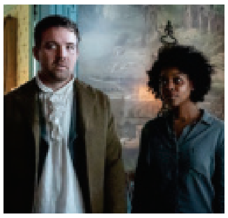
GEORGE TAKEI

→ The *Star Trek* legend takes to the London stage in his historical show *Allegiance*.



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KINDRED

→ Octavia E Butler's novel time-travels to 2022 television screens. And it's only taken 46 years to happen.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Puppet Master

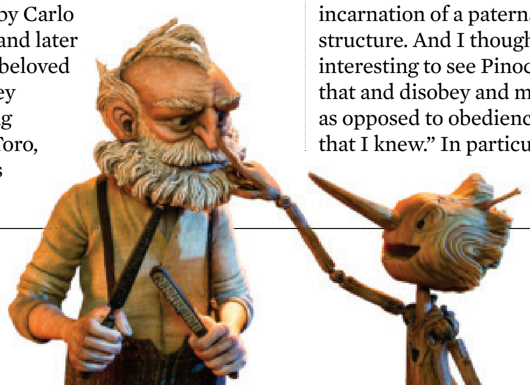
The wooden boy with a nose for trouble gets a stunning stop-motion make-over in Guillermo del Toro's **Pinocchio**

GUILLERMO DEL TORO HAS BEEN preparing to make a stop-motion animation his whole life. "I've been doing it since I was a kid," he says, noting that his earliest shorts were Super 8 claymation. Later, before he made his 1993 debut *Cronos*, he was planning a stop-motion feature, until his workshop was burgled.

"After three years of sculpting 120 puppets and sets, they destroyed it all on the first week of filmmaking. And I said, 'Live action it is for me!'" Now the Mexican maestro behind *The Shape Of Water* and *Nightmare Alley* is finally able to realise that life-long dream with a fresh new take on *Pinocchio*. The story of the wooden boy whose nose grows every time he lies, penned by Carlo Collodi in 1883 and later turned into the beloved 1940 Walt Disney cartoon, has long enchanted del Toro, right back to his childhood in Guadalajara. "It was one of the early movies I saw with my mother and brother," he says.

The film takes recognisable elements, as Gepetto (voiced by David Bradley) carves Pinocchio (Gregory Mann) from wood before magical spirits bring him alive. Ewan McGregor plays the cricket who journeys with them. But as its full title suggests, *Guillermo Del Toro's Pinocchio* very much belongs to its director. Set in Italy at the time of fascism and the rise of Mussolini, it forms a loose trilogy with his earlier films *The Devil's Backbone* (2001) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), which both dealt with the Spanish Civil War.

It's a film about fathers and sons, says del Toro. "The ultimate most merciless and brutal incarnation of a paternal structure is the fascist structure. And I thought, it will be really interesting to see Pinocchio have to navigate that and disobey and make disobedience virtue, as opposed to obedience in the other versions that I knew." In particular, Pinocchio faces the Podestà (Ron Perlman), the local fascist official



Pinocchio and Count Volpe get ready to go shopping.

Guillermo del Toro just won't leave Pinocs alone.

Pinocchio and Gepetto: daddy issues.

Sebastian J Cricket (Ewan McGregor).

> “I thought, it will be really interesting to see Pinocchio have to disobey and make disobedience virtue”

who wants to turn him into a model Italian soldier. “Everybody,” adds del Toro, “is really behaving like a puppet except the puppet.”

Another difference to the Disney film is the design of Pinocchio – an earthy look inspired by Gris Grimly, who illustrated a 2002 edition of Collodi’s book. “I think that was the moment the movie could get made,” says del Toro, “the moment we found *Pinocchio* by Gris Grimly. [It’s] not exactly the one we ended up with, but the basics of it [are there]. I think otherwise, we wouldn’t have tried at all. Without it, there would be no reason for the endeavour, because it embodies an unruliness and an elemental nature, a beauty, a roughness, a tactile, wooden sort of feel… it’s really the key to the whole thing.”

It’s clear that del Toro, who co-directs with Mark Gustafson (animation director on Wes Anderson’s *Fantastic Mr Fox*), wanted to elevate his Pinocchio far beyond the comforting fable familiar to many. Unlike the Robert Zemeckis-directed live-action/animation hybrid *Pinocchio* released on Disney+ recently, the primary target is not the under-10s. “It was not made for kids. Kids can watch it. But it’s not made for kids. It’s made for us.”

The production was hamstrung by Covid, colliding it with the shoot for del Toro’s recent remake of *Nightmare Alley*. “We had the perfect plan for *Nightmare Alley* to ramp down and *Pinocchio* would ramp up. And lo and behold, Covid came and changed our plans. But what was great is every day, *Nightmare Alley* would start or end with *Pinocchio*: we would be on Zoom with the animators.” The two films also influenced each other, especially with production designer Guy Davis working across both.

Like *Nightmare Alley*, Pinocchio features a crucial carnival scene, where Count Volpe (Christoph Waltz) and his monkey Sprezzatura (Cate Blanchett, believe it or not) prey on the boy. “There’s actually a shot that is a [nod to] *Nightmare Alley* when Sprezzatura comes into the carnival,” says del Toro. “I made it a point to have a rolling wheel of fortune in front of him, which is the way the Major [played by Mark Povinelli] enters the carnival in *Nightmare Alley*. And thematically, both deal with truths and lies.”

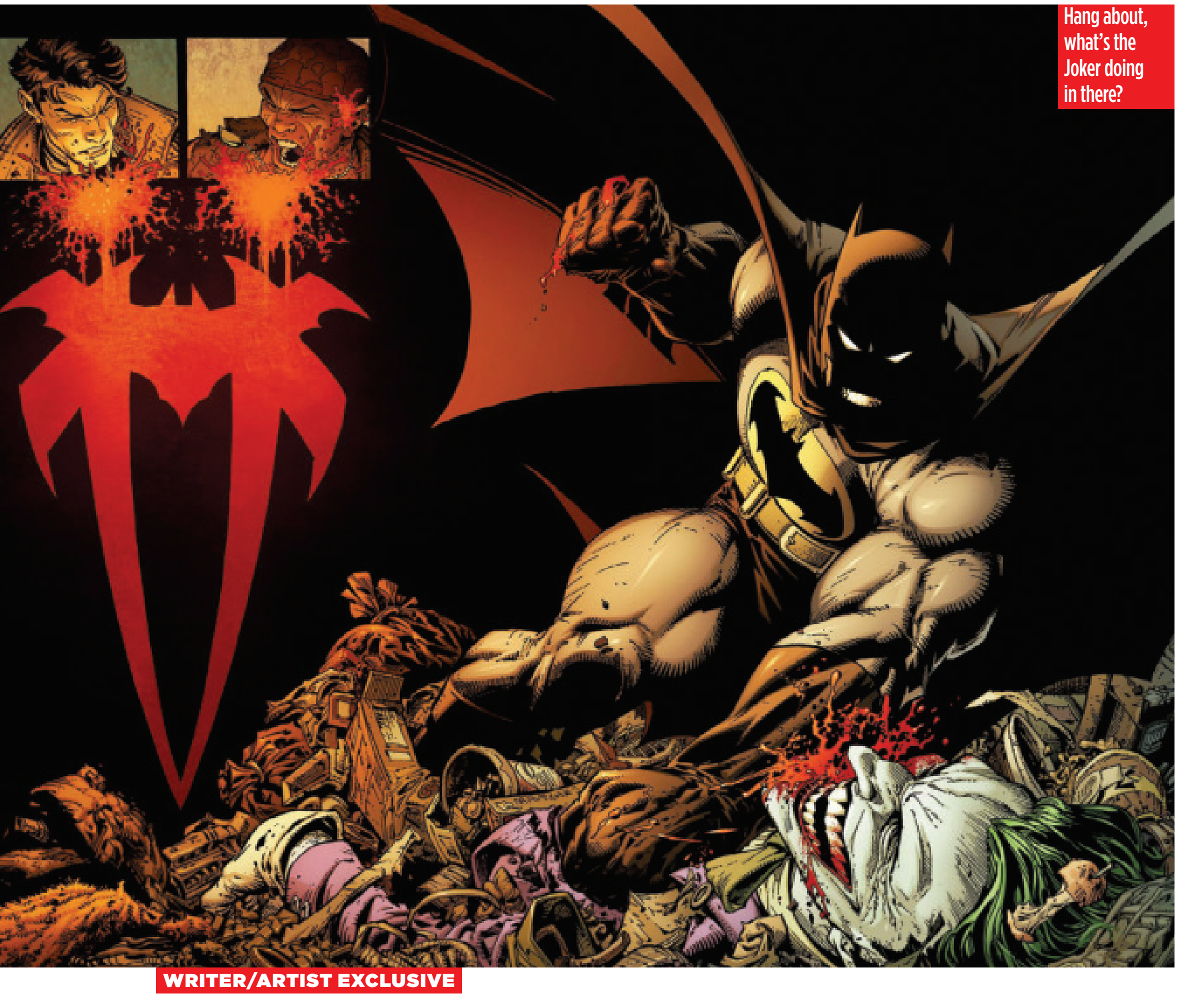
Despite such issues, del Toro says he had the full backing of Netflix, who also supported his earlier animated series *Trollhunters*. He was also adamant that the film would not be compromised by the committee decision-making typical of studios.

“I made it a point to guarantee to the entire crew and cast that it would not be an industrial product, that we would not test it and hone it for an audience,” he says. “That we would hone it for ourselves.”

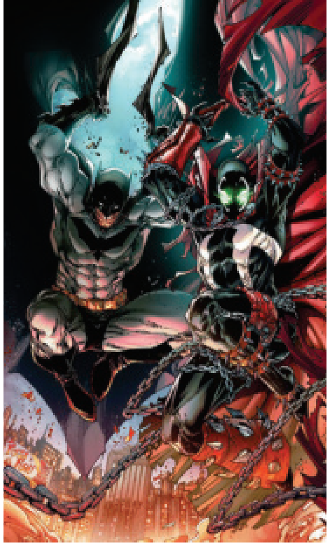
It looks like he has kept his word – and that’s no lie. **JM**

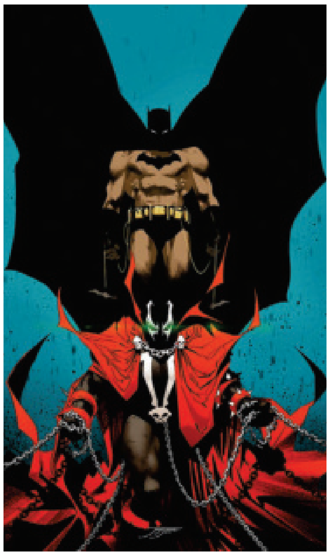
Pinocchio is on Netflix from 9 December.

SCI-FACT! **The very final shot completed on the film was done by Mark Gustafson, who hadn’t animated something personally in 20 years.**



Hang about, what's the Joker doing in there?





WRITER/ARTIST EXCLUSIVE

World's Finest

Todd McFarlane and Greg Capullo reunite for **Batman/Spawn**

FIRST ANNOUNCED IN 2006, the latest meeting between DC's Caped Crusader and Todd McFarlane's Hellspawn has been a long time in the making. But with artist Greg Capullo having since spent around a decade illustrating some of the Dark Knight's numerous titles after previously drawing *Spawn* for about eight years, the timing couldn't be better for *Batman/Spawn*, McFarlane tells Red Alert.

"If we'd done it back then, that was pre Greg doing any Batman artwork, and since then he's made an indelible mark on the character. For a new generation of comic collectors, he's the Batman artist of their time, so you can argue that the delay has been beneficial in the long run because the artist is now a guy who has made his mark on both of those characters over time. So he's not only the perfect artist, he's also the only artist."

"I'm taking on this project as someone who now has about 20 years of experience on both characters," agrees Capullo. "It's a lot of fun and I'm working with my long-time friend and partner, Todd McFarlane, so we're having a blast!"

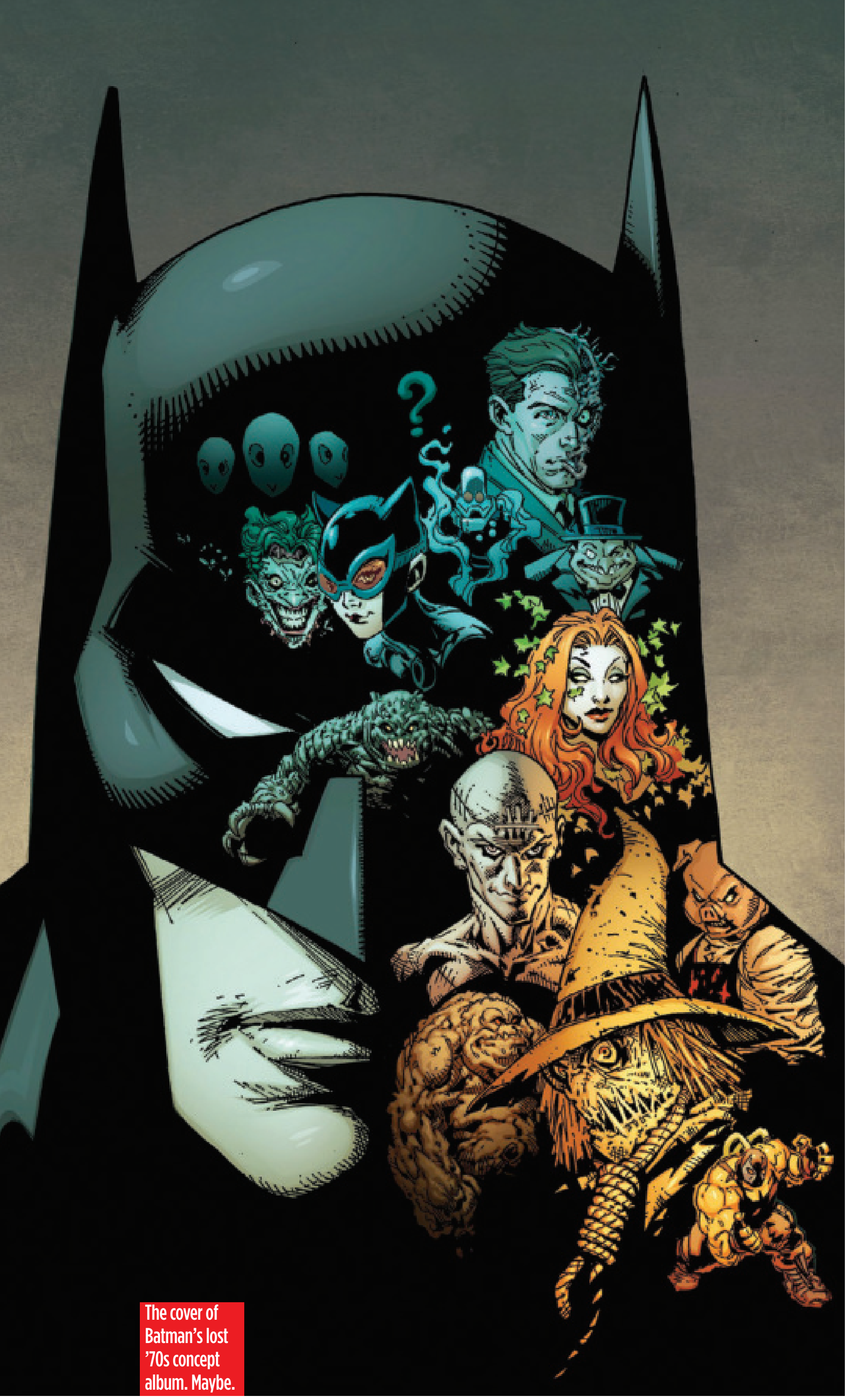
OLD SCHOOL

Batman/Spawn arrives nearly 30 years after Bruce Wayne and Al Simmons's inaugural meeting in 1994's *Spawn/Batman*, which saw McFarlane illustrating Frank Miller's script. "We're not trying to do a sequel or to build upon those stories," says McFarlane, who is also inking Capullo's pencils on the 48-page one-shot. "We're trying to see if we can replicate some of the enthusiasm that was there when those first crossovers came out. Most importantly, we wanted to capture what Greg and I felt when we were collectors and not even professionals, when we bought books ourselves – and especially event books or double-sized issues or things that had meaningful stories or art in them, as I was a big fan of crossovers and books such as *Marvel Two-In-One*, *Marvel Team-Up* and *The Brave And The Bold*."

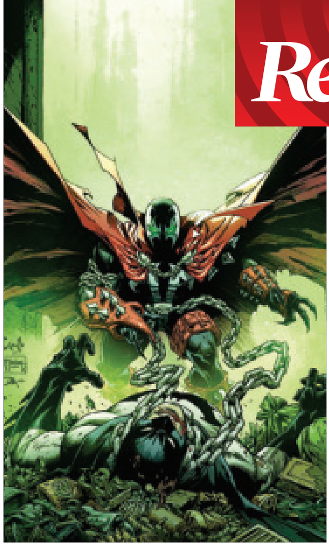
Considering Capullo's extensive experience of all things Bat, McFarlane left the identity of the main adversaries to him, who settled on the avian-themed secret society who were at the heart of his long run on *Batman* with writer Scott Snyder. "One of the things that Todd asked me in the beginning is what villains did I want in the book," he says. "I didn't want to do the Joker because he's been done to death, so I thought the Court of Owls would be the ones who had the mystique, and they would also bring the badass assassins, the Talons, into play."

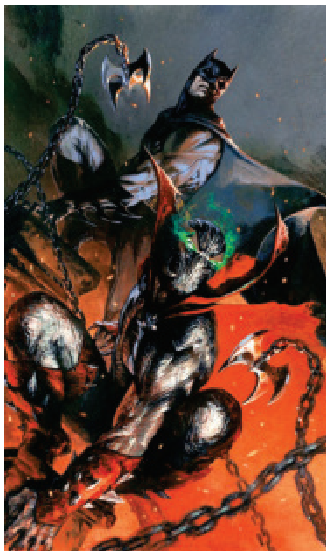
"I then had to figure out a story around his visual choices," adds McFarlane. "With the Court of Owls, Greg and Scott laid down a hell of a foundation, and my job was then to build upon that. There's an easy bridge in the origins of these characters and it was sort of dumb luck which made it easy for me come up with a story that I wanted to tell."

With Spawn's demonic abilities potentially far exceeding



The cover of Batman's lost '70s concept album. Maybe.





> “We wanted to capture what Greg and I felt when we were collectors and not professionals”

Batman's essentially natural talents, McFarlane had to work out a way to even the odds between them.

“If Batman and Spawn are teaming up, you don't need to worry about the power indifference, but if there's going to be some antagonistic moments, as there is especially at the beginning, then Spawn is obviously the superior power,” he says. “Luckily, there's a component that I've brought in from Spawn's mythology to the DC side that negates Spawn's huge advantage over Batman, which are called Dead Zones, as all powers go dead in those zones. That's how you have a battle between Spawn and Batman: you either upgrade Batman or downgrade Spawn, so you can put these two heavyweights in the ring and watch what happens.”

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

However, don't expect to see too many supporting characters or other villains from either world – for a good reason. “It would have been easy to have a rogues' gallery from both sides, which would have looked fantastic, as Greg would have drawn his ass off on it,” admits McFarlane.

“But it would have taken some airtime away from the two main characters, and essentially you're buying this for Batman/Spawn, which is the title of the book. So when I plotted it I wanted to keep these two guys front and centre of this story, and not get distracted with all these other elements from the two universes.” **SJ**

Batman/Spawn is out on 14 December.

SCI-FACT! ***Spawn/Batman*** **was recently reprinted in DC release** ***Batman/Spawn: The Classic Collection.***

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

GETTY

- → Fire up the orgasmatron! *The White Lotus'* Sydney Sweeney to star in remake of **Barbarella**.
- → Lupita Nyong'o set for spin-off **A Quiet Place: Day One**.
- → Harrison Ford is the MCU's new General Thaddeus Ross in **Thunderbolts**.
- → Henry Cavill returning as **Superman** in the DCEU.
- → Tobin Bell back as the Jigsaw killer in the tenth **Saw** movie.
- → Mads Mikkelsen reuniting with Bryan Fuller on family horror **Dust Bunny**.
- → Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy helming a **Star Wars** movie, set after *The Rise Of Skywalker*.
- → Toho Studios bringing us a new **Godzilla** on 3 November 2023.
- → Nicolas Cage starring in post-apocalyptic survival thriller **Sand And Stones**.
- → Jeff Goldblum is the Wizard in two-film *Oz* prequel **Wicked**.
- → *Aquaman*'s David Leslie Johnson-McGoldrick writing **The Conjuring 4**.
- → *Barbarian*'s Georgina Campbell joining killer fungus flick **Cold Storage**.
- → *Smile* producers returning to horror with the bluntly named **Clown In A Cornfield**.

ACTOR EXCLUSIVE

Tomorrow Is Yesterday

Star Trek icon George Takei brings his past alive in **Allegiance**

"I'M AN ANGLOPHILE," DECLARES George Takei, ahead of his arrival on the British stage in a musical inspired by the astonishing reality of his own childhood. "I'm the son of an Anglophile. I've always wanted to bring *Allegiance* to London. And now we get to do it, so we're very excited about this."

A Broadway production in 2015, the show explores the US government's forcible internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans during the Second World War. In the paranoid aftermath of Japan's strike on Pearl Harbor, Takei and his family found themselves imprisoned behind barbed wire, exiled to a series of concentration camps in remote parts of the country.

"It's been my mission," he says, of raising awareness about the events of 80 years ago. "It's a tiny but vitally important chapter of American history. All Americans should know that the noble ideals of our democracy can be so fragile that a whole nation can be swept up in war hysteria, combined with racial prejudice, and go directly against our ideals of equal justice under the law, of due process.

"Earl Warren, attorney general in California, essentially said, 'We have no reports of spying or sabotage or fifth column activities by Japanese-Americans. And that is ominous, because the Japanese are inscrutable' – that racial stereotype! – 'and you can't tell what they're thinking behind that placid façade. And so it would be prudent to lock them up before they do anything.' And that mentality went all the way to the White House."

Takei plays Sam Kimura, an embittered, now elderly survivor reflecting on his time in a relocation centre in rural Wyoming; *Glee*'s Telly Leung is the younger Sam.

"When I used to tell people *Allegiance* was coming they'd say '*What?* A horrible time in our history and they're going to be singing and dancing about it?' My father was a block manager in both of the camps that we were in. He arranged for dances to be held in the mess hall for the teenagers, and a songfest of classic Japanese folk songs for the old folks.

"He said part of resilience, part of survival, is to be able to make our own joy in harsh circumstances, and define beauty under those circumstances. I think there's a lot of wisdom in what my father said."

It's a subject that even the politically-conscious *Star Trek* of the '60s considered too controversial to touch. "We didn't address it directly," Takei tells Red Alert. "[*Star Trek*] was more in the context of the Vietnam war. There was racism there too – the stereotype Asian enemy, the heartless, cruel, saliva-frothing villains.

"Gene Roddenberry was a great visionary, and he addressed the issues of the time, but he couldn't address certain issues because of the fact that television is an advertising medium. I had a private conversation with him, where I suggested another social issue that was not being addressed by *Star Trek*. I wasn't out then. Back then you couldn't be hired if it was known that you were gay.

"I said, 'We haven't dealt with the issue of same-sex marriage,' which was an issue at the time. And he said, 'Yes, you're right, we haven't. We're on television, and I'm walking a tightrope, addressing issues like the Vietnam war or the civil rights movement, with African-Americans campaigning for equality.

George Takei and Lea Salonga.

MATTHEW MURPHY

A tiny George Takei along with family members.

LUKE FONTANA

Salonga, Takei and Telly Leung.

MATTHEW MURPHY

"Let's do the show right here!"

MATTHEW MURPHY

I need to be on the air to be able to address the issues that I'm addressing.' He felt that issue could not be addressed at that time."

Now 85, and one of the last torchbearers from *Trek*'s original cast – Takei remembers the late Nichelle Nichols as "a dear friend and a stunning, courageous woman" – he acknowledges it can be hard to fight for Roddenberry's vision, given the current state of the world. "Gene's gone, and the purity of Gene's philosophy keeps getting watered down with each subsequent iteration of *Star Trek*.

"It is a challenging society that we live in now," he admits. "We have an irrational war going on in Ukraine. One little man with a great big ego and an overblown sense of his authority, claiming he can draw borders on the map because he says so. And all the human suffering that he's bringing to people who aren't threatening him at all. So we are living in that kind of society, where irrational authoritarians are trying to repeat the mistakes of history all over again.

"We've made some progress, in tiny little steps, and then we have a few tiny steps backwards. But I'm still optimistic. It's that old saying, three steps forward, two steps back. But we are one step ahead of where we've been." **NS**

Allegiance runs from 7 January until 8 April at Charing Cross Theatre, London. Visit allegiancemusical.com.

SCI-FACT! **George Takei also co-wrote a graphic novel about his internment experiences, 2019's *They Called Us Enemy*.**

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

What The Butler Saw

Octavia E Butler's seminal science fiction novel **Kindred** finally gets adapted

IN 1979, AUTHOR Octavia E Butler's *Kindred* was published, a benchmark work about a contemporary young black woman who spontaneously time travels back to 1815, where she experiences American slavery first-hand. A powerful fusion of genres that became a global bestseller, it remains a seminal work of literary fantasy. Despite its popularity, however, no one managed to crack how to adapt the narrative into a film or television series until Branden Jacobs-Jenkins came along.

A MacArthur Fellow playwright and producer for recent genre series *Watchmen* and *Outer Range*, Jacobs-Jenkins tells Red Alert that he was aware *Kindred* had been optioned for the better part of four decades as a potential film, but that to him it made much more sense to adapt it as a TV series.

"I think that the funny mistake folks made for so long was thinking it was a movie," Jacobs-Jenkins says. "I've read the book, and it sort of screamed television to me because it's about time, and that's what television as a format really excels at."

Jacobs-Jenkins jumped into formally developing *Kindred* as a series while he

Kevin and Dana go back to the… er… past.

Mallori Johnson plays bewildered Dana James.

> “I think that the mistake folks made for so long was thinking it was a movie”

was working on Brian Watkins’s Prime Video series *Outer Range*, which also explores what happens to a contemporary character wrestling with an utterly unique supernatural experience. He says it put him in the right mindset for figuring out how to dramatise the events that happen to Dana in *Kindred* (which is set in 1976) and make it evergreen for viewers in 2022.

“There’s something that it’s doing that speaks to generations,” Jacobs-Jenkins says. “So I wanted to feel the ideas of this book play itself across multiple generations.” To do so, he committed to shifting the setting to 2016 Los Angeles. In the series, protagonist Dana James (Mallori Johnson) is a recent transplant from New York who has been relatively isolated since she lost her parents to a car accident a decade before.

The move prompts her to buy a house, pursue a career in TV writing, and start dating a waiter named Kevin (Micah Stock), and also ignites violent and visceral dreams where she’s transported to a 19th century plantation. While the series mostly adheres to Butler’s text, there are some major departures, which Jacobs-Jenkins says were born of his intention to “echo or rhyme with what Octavia’s intentions were” in the moment of writing *Kindred*. “She was writing to her contemporaries,” he explains. “It’s set during 1976, the bicentennial year, and there was meaningfulness in her choosing that year. I wanted to find an echo for it, and I felt like 2016 was a) 40 years after the book and b) the last year where we [as a nation] could all kind of agree on what was going on. I was interested in it almost, now, feeling like a naive moment.”

Jacobs-Jenkins says that anchoring the series to a stable, recent moment in time made it easier for the implausible concept of time travel to work in a modern context. It also made him confident enough to weave in an original story element to unravel in the past, which involves Dana’s mother. “One of the things I’ve introduced into this world, which Octavia did in earlier drafts but then kind of backed away from, was creating a sense of lineage to what’s happening to Dana,” he explains.

While the book’s narrative never explains why Dana and eventually Kevin are pulled back in time, Jacobs-Jenkins says he wanted to tie lineage into the concrete reasons for their plight. “In our version, we’re not running away from why is this happening to Dana,” he teases. “We actually are pushing into that as a mystery to solve.

“You know, the book is called *Kindred*. It’s about family in every iteration. It’s about blood relationships. It’s about love relationships. It’s about damaged blood relationships. I just wanted Dana to be able to have a stake in that conversation beyond Kevin. There was a need to really force this character to think through what family could mean to her.”

Hoping to explore those themes over multiple years, Jacobs-Jenkins shares that he’s already outlining ideas for a second season. He also confirms that the first season of *Kindred* doesn’t cover the entirety of Butler’s text. “There’s something about giving viewers the opportunity to read alongside you that is an interesting challenge to me,” he says of uniting both the book readers and series watchers.

“If you watch the show and you read the book, maybe you’ll feel when we’re trying to point at things too.” **TB**

Kindred is on Hulu from 13 December. UK details are TBC.

SCI-FACT! **Researching the novel, Butler visited George Washington’s plantation (which once held 300+ slaves).**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Dream on! Netflix renew **The Sandman** for a second season.

→ Liam Hemsworth replacing Henry Cavill as Geralt in season four of **The Witcher**.

→ *Misfits*’ Howard Overman writing TV version of **The Wicker Man**.

→ Aubrey Plaza and Joe Locke joining Marvel’s **Agatha: Coven Of Chaos**.

→ HBO axes **Westworld** after four seasons.

→ Paul Bettany back as the Vision in **Vision Quest** for Disney+.

→ *His Dark Materials*’ Dafne Keen joining **Star Wars: The Acolyte**.

→ FX adapting Catherine Lacey’s near-future novel **The Answers**.

→ Luc Besson’s **Lucy** set for spin-off series with Morgan Freeman.

→ Cate Blanchett reprising Hela for season two of Marvel’s **What If…?**

→ Netflix cancel **Fate: The Winx Saga** after two seasons.

→ Clancy Brown joining *The Boys* spin-off **Gen V**.

→ *Watchmen*’s Yahya Abdul-Mateen II starring in Marvel’s **Wonder Man**.

→ **Deep Wheel Orcadia** by Harry Josephine Giles wins this year’s Clarke Award for SF book of the year.

GETTY/ COURTESY OF FX NETWORKS

SCI-FACT! As first depicted by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1964's *Avengers* issue 10, Kang eventually becomes the Master of Time, Immortus.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Time Bandit

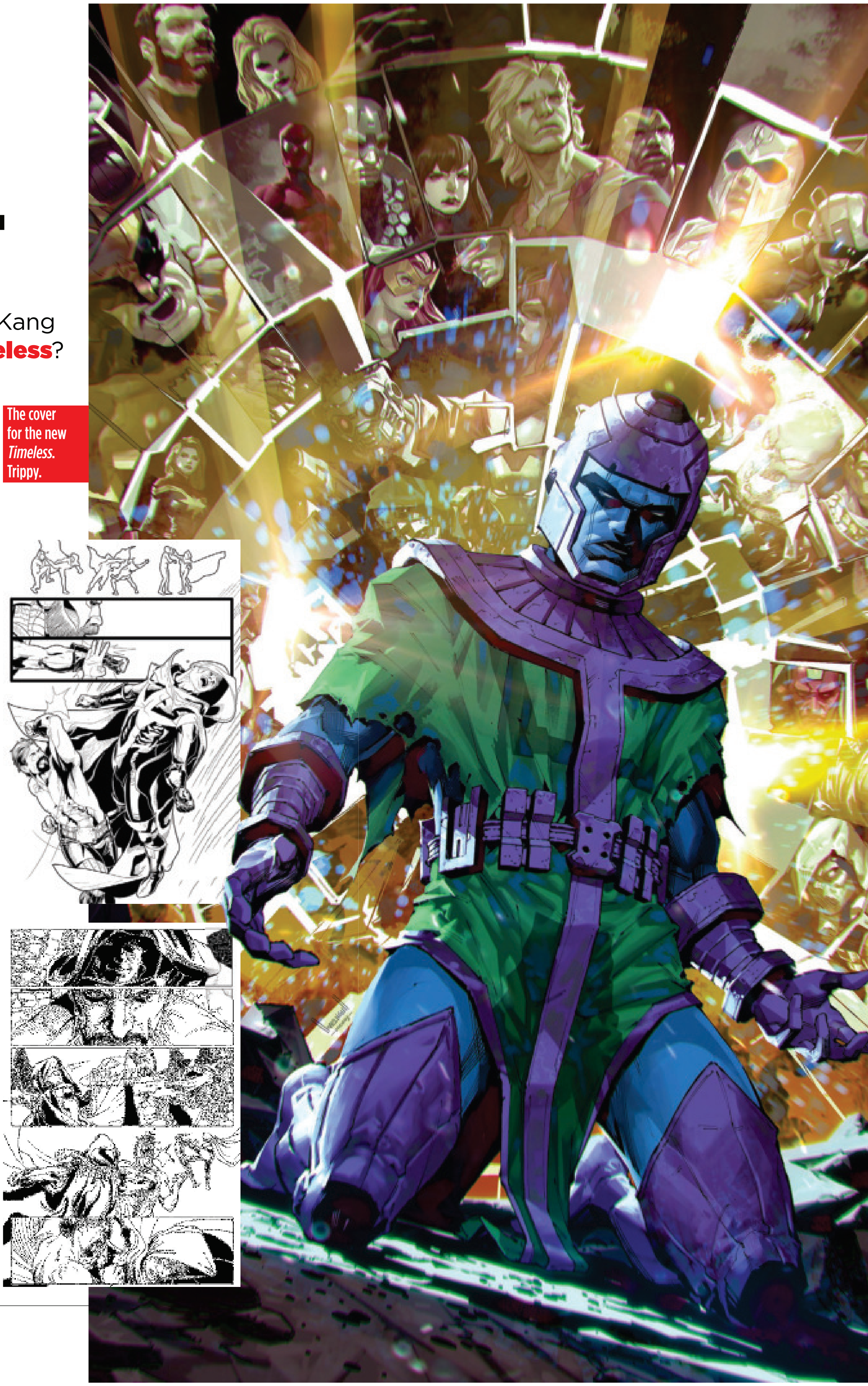
Does time run out for Kang the Conqueror in **Timeless**?

AFTER EXPLORING Kang the Conqueror's temporal exploits in last year's end-of-year extravaganza for Marvel, comics writer Jed MacKay initially had no plans to return for a sequel. But ahead of the Scarlet Centurion's big-screen appearance in February's *Ant-Man And The Wasp: Quantumania*, he's now returning for a second volume of *Timeless*.

"When you do a one-shot like *Timeless*, you generally don't expect to follow it up in any way," he tells Red Alert. "So having the opportunity to do just that and to see what's happening to Kang – and what Kang is happening to – a year later has been a lot of fun."

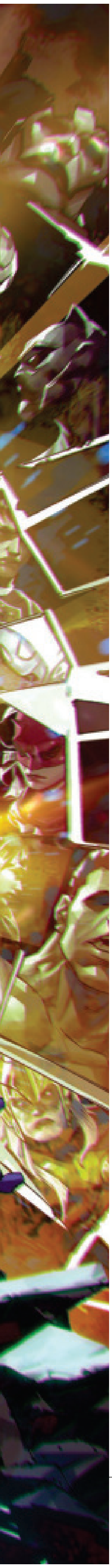
With the megalomaniacal supervillain's multiple identities including Mr Fantastic's far-future relation Nathaniel Richards and ancient Egyptian pharaoh Rama-Tut, MacKay enjoyed delving into his extremely complex personality. "Kang and his time shenanigans have always appealed to me in the same way immortal characters in the Marvel Universe always have," he explains. "There's such a strange and weird history to the Marvel Universe outside of the generally accepted modern period that it's a lot of fun to have characters being able to interact with that broad swathe of potential stories."

While the inaugural issue provided glimpses of 2022's various upcoming big stories, this festive season's *Timeless* looks ahead towards the event series of the next year, such as *Summer Of Symbiotes* and *Fall Of X* –



The cover for the new *Timeless*. Trippy.

SCI-FACT! A "from-the-ground-up" reboot of *Babylon 5* is currently in development at The CW.



alhough MacKay insists that it isn't just a glorified teaser trailer. "The previews are certainly what gets people through the door, but this story itself is a stepping stone to the future and it isn't just an excuse to show off panels of things to come," says MacKay, who also drops some hints regarding what's about to happen in his own regular Marvel titles *Black Cat*, *Strange* and *Moon Knight*. "This time, I've had a little more skin in the game as far as talking about the future, so I'm quite pleased to be setting things up for stories to come."

Billed as "the last battle of Kang the Conqueror", the one-shot will see the tables being turned on the timeline tyrant as he pursues a mysterious "missing moment" through the centuries, only to be forced to go on the run himself. "If the first *Timeless* was a study of Kang from the outside, this is a study of Kang from the inside,"

> **"This story itself isn't just an excuse to show off panels of things to come"**

teases MacKay. "We see what it is that he wants, what he is willing to do to get it, and what happens when he is thwarted in that ambition. And at the end of it, what's left of him."

With MacKay noting that "it's been really exciting seeing each of them pick up the baton and pass it onto the next," the 56-pager is illustrated by a trio of artists: Salvador Larroca, Greg Land and Patch Zircher. "Greg starts us off with some classic sci-fi devastation, Patch then takes us through Kang's flight through time in high style, before Salvador brings us through the desperate last battle with visceral impact," says MacKay.

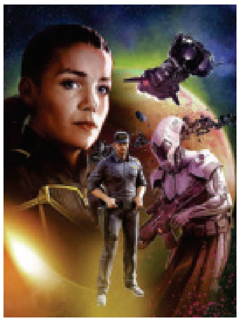
"And I must also credit Daniel Acuña, whose amazing work went into the design of the Twilight Court – a new faction to be reckoned with that will make their debut in this issue." **SJ**

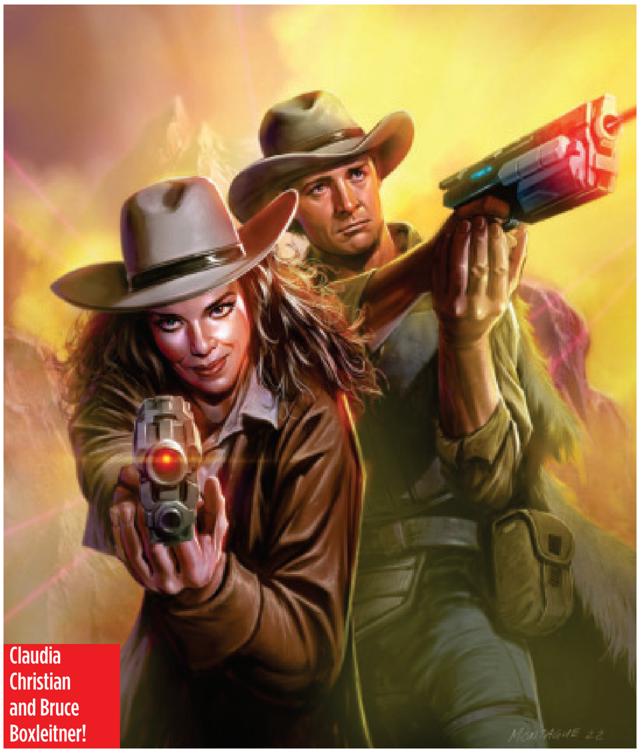
Timeless (2022) is out on 28 December.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Bad Sister

Claudia Christian reunites with her *Babylon 5* castmates for new comic series **Dark Legacies**





Claudia Christian and Bruce Boxleitner!

COMPRISING "TALES of fantasy, horror and sci-fi", *Dark Legacies* is the first offering in Claudia Christian's Universes, an ambitious project from the *Babylon 5* actress which will encompass comics, novels, games and audio dramas. Co-written by Chris McAuley, illustrated by Staz Johnson and published by Scratch Comics, it takes place on an Earth which is gradually shaking off its former dystopian rulers.

"It's driven by mankind wanting a better future for themselves after emerging from a totalitarian government," says McAuley. "The evils of the past are still there, and they're gradually uncovered – hence the title *Dark Legacies*. However, there are powerful moments of reconciliation between so-called enemies and an understanding that reparation has to be paid. This is interspersed with a lot of action, of course, although we want to promote a positive message."

The four-issue miniseries centres on Commander Jessica Steele, described by McAuley as "a kickass combat specialist and smart as hell", who is caught in a web of intrigue after setting out to investigate some conspiracies linked to the fallen regime. "She has a sister who worked as a special ops agent for the old government and who murdered their parents," explains McAuley. "So, she's driven by several forces, the need to readdress the evils of the past and to make her sister pay for the evils of her past."

Along with the likes of *The Expanse* and *Blade Runner*, *Dark Legacies* owes an obvious debt to *Babylon 5*, if only because some of the actors – including Christian herself, who was the model for Jessica – have lent their likenesses and had input into the creation of several other characters.

"J Michael Straczynski crafted one of the greatest tales in the sci-fi genre ever written and I've been influenced by how he expertly crafted interpersonal dialogue and world-built," says McAuley. "The other inspiration I've had from *Babylon 5* is how amazing the cast are. Pat Tallman spends a lot of time working as a therapist, Peter Jurasik is a kind and generous performer and Bruce Boxleitner has been so welcoming and an advocate of the work."

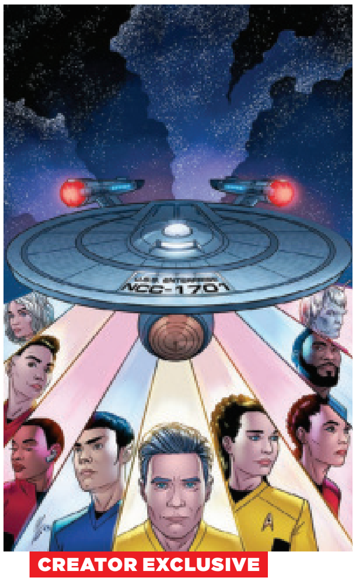
"I see touches of the worldbuilding and depth of characters, of course, otherwise I never would have suggested my *Babylon 5* co-stars become part of this universe," adds Christian. "We are always paying tribute while staying true to our own voice."

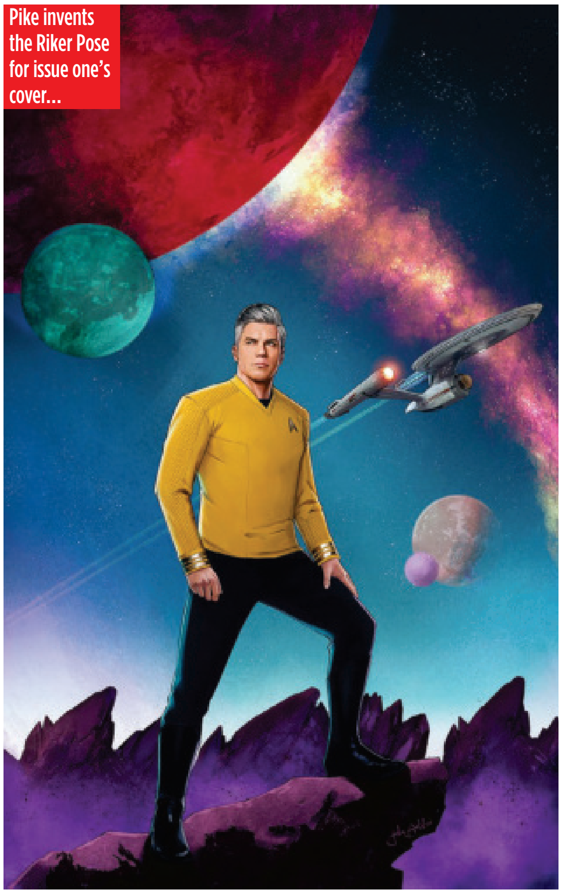
While Tollman was the basis for Jessica's sister, Boxleitner's lookalike is a Martian marshal, who was previously a marine and a mercenary. "He's seen too many atrocities and headed to Mars to do some good in his life," says McAuley. "He's tough as hell, a real old-fashioned Western trope and fun to write."

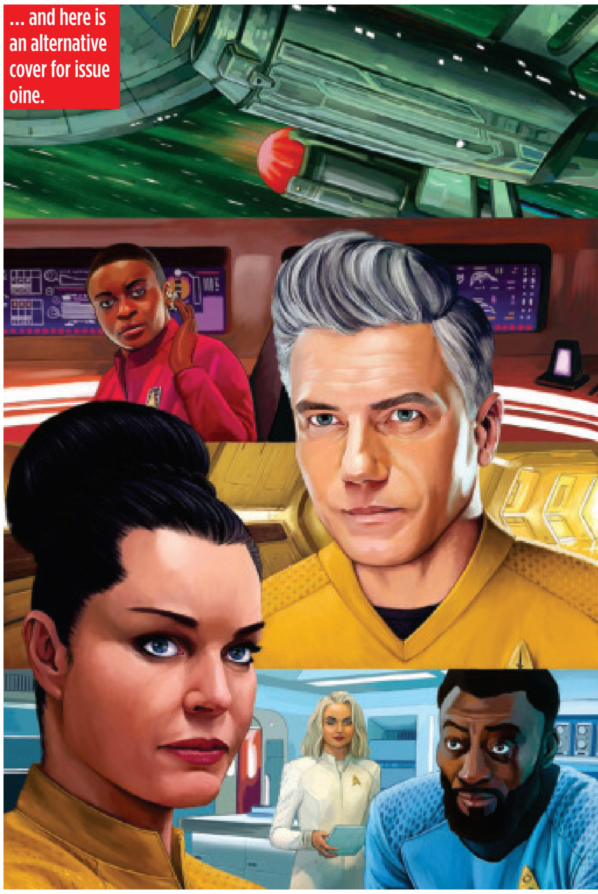
"Claudia is a dear old friend and these days we love and support each other for so many different reasons – not least the fact that we shared good work together," adds Peter Jurasik, whose character equivalent is an intergalactic hitman. "She's a funny, energetic and creative person to share time with." **SJ**

Claudia Christian's Dark Legacies issue one is out now.

SCI-FACT! The Illryians first appeared in DC Fontana's 1989 classic *Star Trek* tie-in novel *Vulcan's Glory*.




Pike invents the Riker Pose for issue one's cover...


... and here is an alternative cover for issue oine.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

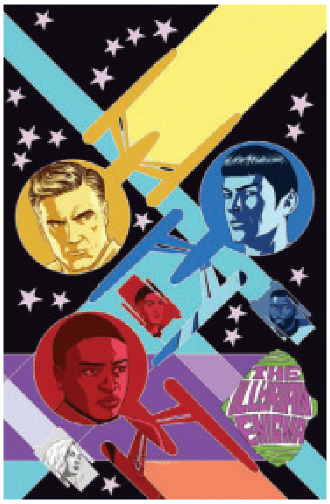
Pike Life

Star Trek: Strange New Worlds comes to comics with **The Illyrian Enigma**

IN THE WORDS OF *Strange New Worlds – The Illryian Enigma*'s co-writer Mike Johnson, as it harks back to "the bright colours, high adventure and episodic nature of the original series in a very modern way", *Star Trek*'s latest incarnation is almost as suited to comics as it is to TV.

"The most obvious distinction between *Strange New Worlds* and the other current *Star Trek* is the return to the episodic format, as each episode is a fairly self-contained story," adds artist Megan Levens. "You can have a story with a profound moral dilemma in one instalment, then the next you can have a body-swap comedy, and the fate of the entire galaxy isn't always hanging in the balance. Expanding into comics is a great way to tell even more stories with these characters that can be just as important, funny or thrilling, but that perhaps don't fit into the schedule or budget of a 10-episode season. It also opens up opportunities beyond what can be done, or at least done well, on-screen. However crazy it is, if I can draw it, we can throw it at the Enterprise crew!"

The four-parter takes place between this year's first season and the upcoming second season. "It was too great an opportunity to miss, as we've been able to fill in some of the mystery surrounding the Illyrians without spoiling anything related to season two," says Johnson, who is co-scripting the miniseries with *Star Trek* TV writer Kirsten Beyer. "If we're fortunate enough to make more *Strange New Worlds* comics, I think we'll branch off from the show and tell completely original stories, as there are a lot of worlds out there!"



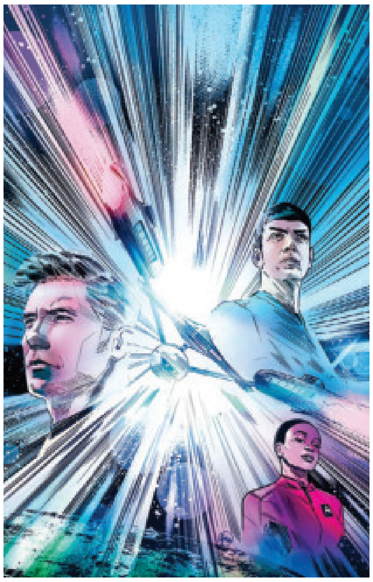
The title alludes to the intriguing background of spacefaring aliens the Illryians, who count *Strange New Worlds*' Number One, Una Chin-Riley, among their ranks. "*The Illyrian Enigma* refers to the fact that we don't really know all that much about the Illyrians," explains Johnson. "Their history is very much a mystery, one that hasn't helped to dispel the prejudice against them in the Federation. This story reveals more about them, and hopefully sets the stage for even more stories about them in the future."

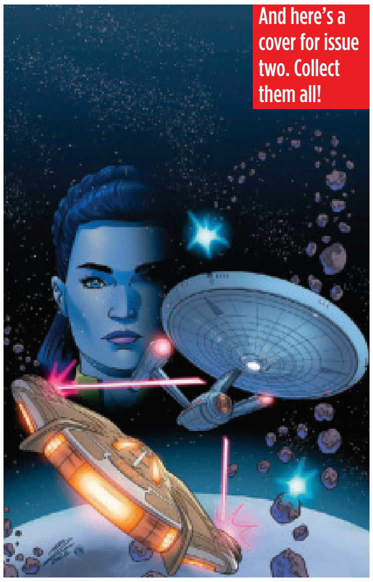
> "However crazy it is, if I can draw it, we can throw it at the Enterprise crew"

The first issue opens with Una being accused of genetic modification by Starfleet, with Commander Pike setting out to prove her innocence.

"Without spoiling too much, we can say that while Una is not actually present for most of the story, as she's in custody, she looms large over everything that's happening," teases Johnson. "It's really her predicament that's driving events, and Spock becomes very central to the story in an unexpected way."

SCI-FACT! Philippe's next project is an "introspective, philosophical film" about *Star Trek* legend William Shatner.





And here's a cover for issue two. Collect them all!

Levens describes herself as "a nearly lifelong Trekkie", and a special *Star Trek* cruise that she went on turned out to be useful for her research. "I had the foresight to take detailed photos of the costumes and props that were on display there, although I was kicking myself later for not spending more time studying those crazy boots!" she laughs.

"The Enterprise herself is [based on] a model that I can photograph from any angle, which helps keep the wide space shots nice and cinematic. And yes, I get to play with toy spaceships and call it work, which is amazing!" **SJ**

The Illyrian Enigma issue one is out on 21 December.

They're off to see the wizard, *The Wizard Of Oz*...

Lynch and Laura Dern on *Wild At Heart*.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

Twin Freaks

Director **Alexandre O Philippe** dives deep into how *The Wizard Of Oz* influenced David Lynch

DAVID LYNCH IS probably not secretly working on a new film, as was rumoured earlier this year before the Cannes Film Festival, but director Alexandre O Philippe has brought us the next best thing. *Lynch/Oz* is a fascinating documentary looking at the influence of 1939 fantasy classic *The Wizard Of Oz* on the genius behind *Twin Peaks* and *Blue Velvet*. "Without *The Wizard Of Oz*, I think Lynch would be making very different films," says Philippe, whose previous credits include *The People Vs George Lucas* and *Memory: The Origins Of Alien*.

As the film demonstrates, the moment you look for Oz references in Lynch, they're everywhere, from the more overt (such as the Wicked Witch allusions in *Wild At Heart*) to more subtle nods seen in everything from *The Straight Story* to *Mulholland Drive*. Does he see Lynch as an Oz-like figure? "I mean, he's the man behind the curtain of his own work. He doesn't like to explain himself. A lot of his movies are about illusions... It's a motif that is unmistakably all over David Lynch's work."

Rather than simply present his own thesis, Philippe approached six friends to get their take: filmmakers Karyn Kusama (*Destroyer*), John Waters (*Pink Flamingos*), Rodney Ascher (*Room 237*), David Lowery (*The Green Knight*), Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead (*Synchronic*), and critic Amy Nicholson (co-host of podcast Unspooled), whose elegant analysis opens *Lynch/Oz*. Beyond offering illuminating insights, this sextet also get intimate about the impact of both Lynch and Victor Fleming's tale of Dorothy's journey to Oz.

"What I really appreciated with all of them, or at least most of them, is the fact that they all had personal stories to share," says Philippe. "Karyn Kusama talks about being a waitress in New York City and serving pancakes to Lynch. And David Lowery talks about watching *The Wizard Of Oz* for the first time on a black and white television and then discovering that it actually had some colour in it, later on in his life. And then obviously, John Waters talks about his own work and his own shared passion for *The Wizard Of Oz*. That to me is the real meat of this."

Talking to each one over the phone, Phillippe then shaped their ideas, scripted it, and got them to re-record the final analysis in a studio. Then the real work began, as he and editor David Lawrence illustrated each point made by his interviewees with carefully selected clips from both Lynch's work and *Oz*, often juxtaposing the two. "We had to weigh every single clip. I mean, it's a very, very painstaking work, of finding the right moments."

While Phillippe has never met Lynch, does *he* think Lynch will ever make another movie? "He is as much a mystery to me as he is to you. I hope so!" **JM**

Lynch/Oz is in cinemas from 2 December, and on Blu-ray/DVD from 5 December.

BAS BOGAERTS, ALAMY

SCI-FACT! The earliest existing screen adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* is a short 1901 film titled *Scrooge; Or Marley's Ghost*.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Spirited Away

Sean Anders on **Spirited**, his radical reinvention of Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*

NJ TRANSIT SHUTTLE

The scariest thing is the thought of Ferrell singing.

THERE ARE FEW works of literature that have been adapted as many times as *A Christmas Carol*. But none have ever been told from the perspective of the ghosts… Until now, that is.

That's the USP of *Spirited*, Apple TV+'s new musical comedy retelling of Charles Dickens's 1843 novella that stars Will Ferrell as a disillusioned Ghost of Christmas Present and Ryan Reynolds as his "perp", ruthless PR executive Clint Briggs.

"The ghosts are really the protagonists of *A Christmas Carol*," the film's director and co-writer Sean Anders tells Red Alert, "because they're the ones with a job to do, they're the ones with something to accomplish. So we were thinking, 'Why has this never been done before, to do *A Christmas Carol* from the other side?'"

After Anders and his co-writer John Morris had settled on the Ghost of Christmas Present as their main character, the first person they called, he says, was Will Ferrell. Anders and Ferrell had worked together on the two *Daddy's Home* flicks, and the director insists that casting the actor as *Spirited*'s warm-hearted protagonist was a no-brainer.

"He was very excited about it," Anders says, "and so we talked through the story and the character and then I said, 'By the way, we're thinking that this is going to be a musical, is that a deal-breaker?' Will said no, it wasn't – I think it was something that he was excited about at first then had to get his head around. But he really embraced it and jumped right in."

> “I love Christmas movies… I'm a sucker for all of them”

Spirited's Scrooge figure is a very modern kind of baddie. An unscrupulous PR guru described by Ferrell's character as "like the perfect combination of Mussolini and [Ryan] Seacrest", he needed to be, in Anders's words, "slick, cool and charismatic" and there's only one guy you call when that's what you want – Ryan Reynolds.

"We wanted his character to cover a lot of ground," Anders says, "as far as some of the things we deal with today. That's what led us to media consulting and social media, this guy not being the standard, greedy Scrooge character, but more of a person who is spreading bad ideas and playing to our worst instincts."

Though *Spirited* goes to some dark places, it's a story that's full of heart and laughs, as you'd expect from any Christmas movie. Anders says he's wanted to make a festive-themed flick for as long as he's been a filmmaker.

"I love Christmas movies," he smiles. "I'm a sucker for all of them, going back to the old *Miracle On 34th Street*. I grew up

SCI-FACT! Paul Williams came up with the song “Scrooge” while sitting on a park bench reading a Lawrence Block novel.

Ryan Reynolds and Will Ferrell: shocking.

watching Christmas movies every year on TV in Washington with my family, and they just kind of stuck.

“The second we wrapped, the Christmas season was actually starting, so at that point, it was a little like ‘Oh god, Christmas!’ This year will be better!” **SO**

Spirited is on Apple TV+ now.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

When Love Returns

The restored version of **The Muppet Christmas Carol** debuts on Disney+

Miss Piggy in HD? She’ll be absolutely delighted.

WHENEVER THERE’S A ranking of Britain’s most beloved Crimbo movies, *The Muppet Christmas Carol* consistently places in the top five. But even the most ardent fans of Michael Caine’s Ebenezer Scrooge and Kermit the Frog’s Bob Cratchit may not know that they’ve never seen the complete movie that director Brian Henson intended audiences to enjoy.

What was released to cinemas in 1992 was missing the Paul Williams-penned song “When Love Is Gone”, which was sung to young Scrooge by his neglected love Belle (Meredith Braun). It was a true three-hanky moment which signified Scrooge closing his heart to love and embracing his miserly ways. But in celebration of *The Muppet Christmas Carol*’s 30th anniversary, Henson and some determined archivists have achieved a Christmas miracle by restoring the song to a new cut of the film, available this month on Disney+.

At the recent D23Expo, Henson revisited the long-told lore of how it came about that former Chairman of Walt Disney Studios Jeffrey Katzenberg made them excise the song. Back in 1992, they screened the film for an audience of families in England. Everyone in the production was nervous.

“It was a little scary because it’s not a laugh-out-loud movie,” Henson remembered. “The Muppets had always had laugh-out-loud movies. But *Muppet Treasure Island* is also not a laugh-out-loud movie and yet people afterwards will say it’s one of the funniest movies they’ve ever seen. So we watched the movie and Jeffrey Katzenberg, who was always very supportive yet very strict to work with, said, ‘Not a lot of laughs in there, Brian.’”

Luckily, the audience scorecards gave *The Muppet Christmas Carol* a stellar 94 out of 100. However, Katzenberg still had some input. “Jeff said, ‘You have a super-solid movie. But I saw four kids leave to go to the bathroom during ‘When Love Is Gone.’” Because of that observation, Katzenberg wanted to remove the song. Henson tried to argue its value, but because the film ended up costing more than initially budgeted, didn’t feel he had much leverage. However, he did ask if once the movie transitioned to home video, it could be restored. The compromise was agreed upon… but then the restored version went missing.

When the film was due for a high-definition remaster, Henson went back to find it, but it was nowhere to be found. “Disney post-production couldn’t believe it,” Henson remembered. “They said, ‘Brian, it’s got to be here. Nothing can leave the Technicolor lab.”

A two-year search ensued, but to no avail – until they went back to the 1991 production negatives. “What we did was we found that reel with the song back in, so it’s just as good as the negative really,” Henson said. “Now the film has been put back together and it’s so beautiful to hear what Paul did. It’s just a wonderful balance that’s so achingly beautiful.” **TB**

Julian Sands and Bill Pullman star in the drama.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

River's Edge

Stef Penney talks about adapting Algernon Blackwood's **The Willows** for radio

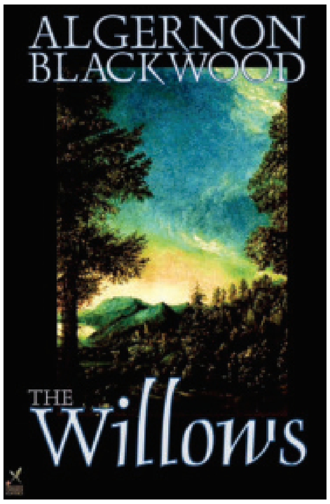
WHILE MANY *SFX* readers will be familiar with MR James, his contemporary Algernon Blackwood is a more obscure figure. But perhaps a new radio dramatisation of the author's 1907 novella "The Willows" can change that a little.

The story follows two adventurers canoeing down the Danube, who make camp on a remote island in a swampy stretch of the river, surrounded by rustling willow bushes. There, the narrator gradually comes to feel like an unwelcome trespasser in a zone where the "veil between worlds" has worn thin…

Novelist Stef Penney's adaptation came about due to one of its stars. "I didn't know who Algernon Blackwood was," Penney confesses. "The director, Kate McCall, came to me with the idea, but it was brought to her by Julian Sands – he really wanted to do it."

Sands, who portrays Blackwood's anonymous Swede, also roped in a famous co-star for the two-hander: Bill Pullman, who plays the narrator. "He was in London doing the play *Mad House*," Penney explains. "But that was really because he and Julian are friends. Julian was like, 'Oh, why don't I ring up my mate Bill?' 'Yeah, okay!'"

The writer found adapting the story quite difficult. "It's very much of its time," she says. "Blackwood was a theosophist – he hung out with [Russian mystic] Madame Blavatsky and people like that – and I find it hard to get my head around that kind of thinking. I didn't really understand where he was coming from."



One key move was to "pull back on the strange beings" witnessed by the narrator, focusing more on the atmospheric landscape. "We took an executive decision that we didn't need giant copper-coloured beings ascending into the air, because I didn't know what to do with that," Penney laughs, admitting that purists might be furious. "It was interesting to take that idea of horror around beings that are indefinable and think, 'How do we make this appeal to people who don't know anything about that tradition of fiction?'"

SOUND THINKING

Her director, meanwhile, proposed tweaking the period, as a way in for Covid-era listeners. "'What if it was set just after the Spanish Flu epidemic?' Suddenly there was this parallel about being constrained and then allowed out again. That gave it more tension than just being about people who habitually go into the wilderness and have adventures."

Penney also toyed with "doing a queer critical theory take". "There's a lot of queer coding in Algernon Blackwood stories. Also, I've read an account of his life, and he lived in very homosocial spaces… I thought, 'This could make it much more emotionally resonant.'" But that idea "ended up falling away. It just wouldn't go like that. Perhaps that was forcing the material too much."

The novella seems a natural fit for radio, as it's very much concerned with eerie sounds, from the gurgles and splashes of the Danube to a "multitudinous pattering" on the heroes' tent. "This is the strength of the story," Penney says. "Not only does he have the whole natural soundscape of the river in spate, the willows and the wind, you have this otherworldly soundscape, which is where you can get really creative. It starts out quite idyllic, then gets stranger and stranger, and becomes very threatening. We tried to build a really rich sound picture of this extraordinary setting." **IB**

The Willows airs on Radio Four at 3pm on 17 December, and will be available on BBC Sounds.

GETTY

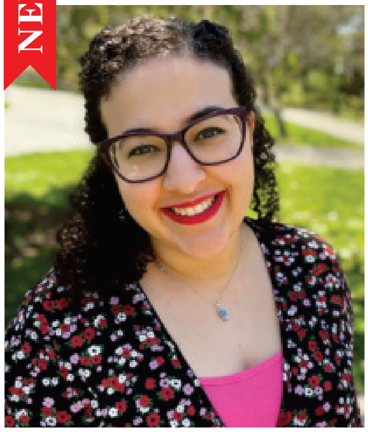
SCI-FACT! **"The Willows" was HP Lovecraft's favourite story: "Here art and restraint in narrative reach their very highest development".**

SCI-FACT! O'Neill and Mills also teamed on the novels *Serial Killer* and *Goodnight, John-Boy*.

NEW AUTHOR

HADEER ELSBAI

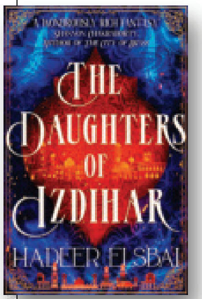
MEET THE LIBRARIAN BEHIND FEMINIST FANTASY *THE DAUGHTERS OF IZDIHAR*



Tell us about your protagonists.
→ Nehal is a bold, stubborn aristocrat, Giorgina a quiet but resilient bookseller. Both women are magic users, and both of them are fighting for political and personal freedom with a radical women's rights group, though they go about it in very different ways.

Is this world based on any real place?
→ It's deeply rooted in 19th century Cairo, though I took plenty of liberties of course. For example, in 19th century Cairo, upper-class women like Nehal would have lived in secluded harems, but that wouldn't have worked well for my purposes here.

How long did it take to write?
→ I started in May 2017 and had a finished draft by March 2019. It's changed very much – shrunk from three POVs to two, one character has abilities she didn't start out with, another character was excised, and the ending is completely different.



Did you do much research?
→ I read lots about 19th century Egypt and Egypt's suffrage movement. My favourite factoid is that in the late 1800s, Egypt opened a medical school for orphaned girls because there was a shortage of female doctors who could treat women in harems. These "doctresses" rode around on donkeys.

Any advice for budding authors?
→ Try to look at your book every day, even if all you're doing is thinking. Time spent brainstorming is important too!

The Daughters Of Izdihar is out on 12 January, published by Orbit.

THE FINAL FRONTIER

KEVIN O'NEILL 1953-2022

A true one-off in the world of British comics

QUIRKY TO THE POINT OF perverse, Kevin O'Neill's art wasn't so much idiosyncratic as a glimpse into some gloriously hellish pocket dimension skulking just beneath our own.

Born in southeast London's Eltham, he joined publishers IPC at 16, rising from office boy to assistant art editor on *2000 AD*. O'Neill defined the visual energy of the new comic, bringing an electric touch of punk cheek and devilment to the newsstands. He also fought for creator credits, a breakthrough in the British comics industry.

O'Neill's strips in *2000 AD* included *Ro-Busters* – essentially a cyber-riff on *Thunderbirds* – and sequel *ABC Warriors*, filled with memorably grotesque visions of future war. *Dash Decent* spoofed *Flash Gordon* while *Terror Tube*, a one-off strip in prog 167, introduced Nemesis and Torquemada, whose enmity would fuel the long-running *Nemesis The Warlock* – a gnarly, techno-gothic epic unlike anything else in contemporary comics.

Lured to DC in the mid-'80s, O'Neill found his entire art style branded "objectionable" by the American Comics Code Authority. "I loved that!" he reflected, relishing the mischief as ever. "I loved the idea that these old grannies were sitting in an office in New York poring over every comic page. It was 1950s."

A reunion with *Nemesis* writer Pat Mills, *Marshal Law* for Epic Comics was a coruscating takedown of the superhero genre that later fronted Brit weekly *Toxic! The League Of Extraordinary Gentlemen* with Alan Moore followed, an ambitious safari through centuries of pulp literature that showcased O'Neill's meticulous attention to detail alongside his untethered imagination.

"I prefer marching to the beat of my own drum," he once said, as if it needed to be said. "Sacrificing my creative freedom for reasons of commerce is at odds with my nature. I'm content with operating at the fringe of mainstream comics." **NS**

ROBBIE COLTRANE 1950-2022

Scottish actor and comedian most recently known for Hagrid in the *Harry Potter* movies.

JULES BASS 1935-2022

Producer of *ThunderCats* and 1977's animated version of *The Hobbit*.

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HE KNOWS WHEN YOU'VE BEEN BAD OR GOOD, SO BE GOOD FOR GOODNESS' SAKE! SANTA'S TAKING NO PRISONERS IN

VIOLENT NIGHT

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

SEASON'S

BEATINGS

THERE'S A SEA OF SANTA HATS AS FAR back as the eye can see. Christmas carols fill the air of the Empire Stage at the Javits Centre in New York. But there's something different about this festive gathering. First of all, it's October and outside, New York City is filled with pumpkins. Secondly, those Santa hats – usually a sign of safety and magic – are all splattered with blood. *SFX* is at New York Comic Con for the world premiere of *Violent Night*, a very different Christmas tale.

Introduced by stars David Harbour and John Leguizamo, alongside director Tommy Wirkola, this Christmas movie with a twist attracted a full house of 4,000 people – and they *loved* it. One person, however, was slightly on edge – Wirkola himself. "After the first two minutes I got really scared," he recalls. "Obviously it's not a theatre, so the sound is not ideal, I was like, 'Oh, God, I hope this works'. But from the first laugh, people were so into it."

Wait, first laugh? That's right – this is an 18-rated Christmas movie full of ho, ho, hos. When we first meet Santa in *Violent Night*, he's kind of lost his way – except he's definitely still able to find his way around a drinks cabinet. But a chance encounter with a traditionally festive feuding family sees him reach a tipping point when it comes to protecting innocent child Trudy. Suddenly Saint Nick ain't so jolly.

Oh, and it turns out that one of the most famous mythical characters in history has a slightly different backstory to the one you might know; fortunately that makes him a dab hand when wielding a weapon. Or, indeed, anything that can be used as a weapon. And we do mean anything.

Bizarrely all of these ingredients make for one of the funniest films of the year. Wirkola says that the humour was always a huge part.

"The writers Pat [Casey] and Josh [Miller] had really, really nailed the tone," he recalls. "I would say before I came on board, it was a mix of things, it had action and humour and a lot of heart. But of course, I brought a lot of stuff I love and my sense of humour into it and we did a few more passes. There were some action sequences that got really elaborated on and →

"Hey Santa, what are those reindeer doing?"

GUESS WHO'S COMIN' TO TOWN?

David Harbour is Santa Claus

What was your journey to *Violent Night*?
I first heard the pitch from my agent, who told me, "It's a violent Santa Claus movie." My initial response was "What are you talking about?" But then they told me the filmmakers wanted to talk to me about it. So they called me up and told me the general idea, and it sounded so hilarious, fresh and different. Then they sent me the script, and I got really into it, but in my mind, it was still a big risk because it was like two movies smashed into one. That's what was so unique about it. So when I started the script, I didn't think it could work, but by the end, I was choked up and thought it was really beautiful. It was a great script that we made better as we got into it.

This Santa is very different from the ones we've seen before...
David's [Leitch, producer] got a real eye for story within the action world. One of the things that I like so much about these worlds he creates – from *Atomic Blonde* to *John Wick*, to *Nobody* – is that he takes a somewhat ordinary person, at least on the surface, and allows them to become these crazy action heroes. This genre that he has mastered feels fresh and that's what really excited me about this project.

He's very connected to detail, even to a point where we'd shoot things and then he'd want to go back and pick up little pieces where we could make the story more intense here or there. It's like he had a big sandbox in which to play, and instead of being worried about his brand or what he's doing, he just wants to play.

What was it like working with Tommy Wirkola?
Tommy was very positive, enthusiastic and supportive. He's so creative and willing to throw things out in a moment's notice. He was up for changing everything if a better idea comes up. Right from the beginning, he had a real passion for this story.

This was your first time in a Santa suit – what was it like?
The suit I wear in this film isn't a traditional Santa suit. We found a balance between what we see as the traditional big red jolly suit and also the leather harness, boots and other elements of his long-distant past woven throughout.

David Harbour as the baddest ass Santa ever seen.

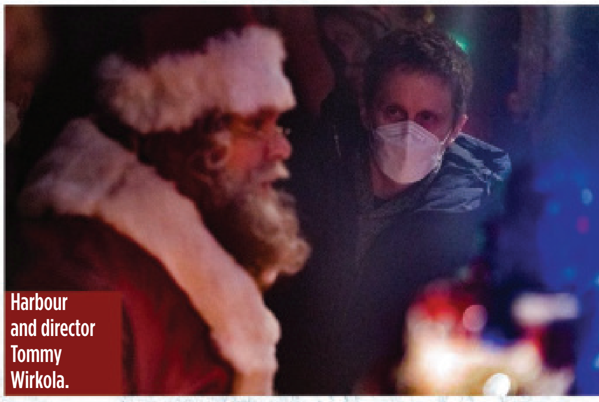
> “We had to stop shooting one day because the oil in the dolly froze”

brought a lot more humour into. I really like to push the tone as far as I can and mix those laughs with the shocks and surprises.”

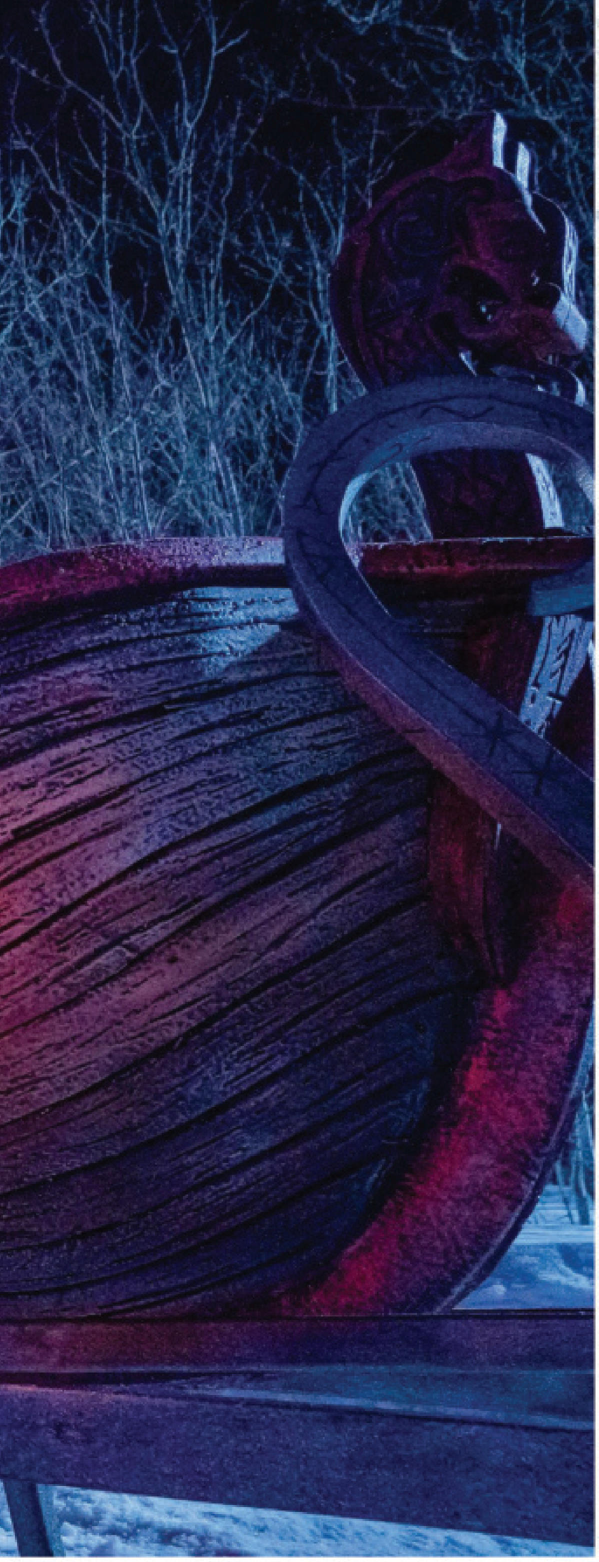
Christmas came early for Wirkola last year. “It’s been a quick journey, that’s for sure,” he laughs as he recalls being sent the script at the end of summer 2021 after the creative team responded well to his film *The Trip*. “They basically said, ‘It’s like *Die Hard* but with Santa Claus.’ That sounds cool, for sure. But it could also be just a gimmick in a way, so I was a little hesitant but excited about getting the script.”

Fortunately, he was immediately on board. “I just really responded to it. It had all the crazy things and the action and the violence I expected, but it really had a heart. I immediately saw what they were trying to do and also my way in and what I wanted to embrace and that was to make sure that it still feels like a Christmas movie. I jumped on board and it was not long after we got David Harbour as Santa Claus, and then we were off to the races because David had a really short window before he went to do other things. It’s just a little over a year since I first read the script. So it’s been a *quick* one.”

Time was also a factor because a Christmas film needs snow. Fortunately Wirkola has previous with blood on the white stuff thanks to his two *Dead Snow* movies.



Harbour and director Tommy Wirkola.



"Yeah, it was like coming home!" he laughs. "Being a Norwegian I tried to get it to Norway. I obviously shot movies here, I know it really well, I'm from the north. I know what kind of settings and snow and all that stuff that we have there we can use, but Canada, and especially Winnipeg, have a really, really strong tax incentive. So that was what tipped that in their favour.

"Incredibly enough I'm pretty used to cold and snow and winter but they found a place that was colder than where I'm from and it was just insanely cold there. Like, minus 25 to 30 degrees Celsius when we're outside shooting. Because it's so flat there is not a hill nearby and the whole area, that whole state, it feels like it's just always this constant wind hitting you, so it was a challenging shoot in many ways just weatherwise!

"But I also think it gives the movie something and gives us something extra. I can feel it that we've been outside. You can feel that we've been in the forest, in the snow in the middle of the night, it gives it an extra edge for sure. But also I knew from experience as well that there's just stuff, especially special effects gear and make-up and blood, that doesn't work as well when it gets cold. Things just freeze up and it makes it all uncomfortable.

"But I never experienced this before. Actually we had to stop shooting one day because the oil in the dolly froze. So we just couldn't operate the camera. It was like, okay, I think this is now officially too cold to be outside. Intense."

SANTA PANIC

Violent Santas are nothing new in cinema, with 1984's *Silent Night, Deadly Night* causing quite the controversy for his murderous depiction. Did Wirkola have any reservations about taking this route with a much-loved character?

"You know what, I didn't," he laughs. "I just thought it was funny. And in the end, our Santa is a good guy. I had no reservations. I think it's a lot of fun to take something like this, a character that everybody knows obviously, and do something new and fun with it.

"Of course, *Bad Santa* did one version a few years back and I honestly feel like as long as it has heart and it has a *good* heart and you leave the theatre going out feeling you've seen a Christmas movie, hopefully, you're good."

Of course, Wirkola also hopes you leave feeling a very different way too… "I remember so well when I first saw Peter Jackson's *Braindead*," he says. "It was an epiphany to me, at a young age, that I could laugh and be disgusted at the same time and want to look away, but I can't look away because it's so funny. Then I watched *The Evil Dead*, so of course I would say Jackson and [Sam] Raimi especially, were masters with that. Since then, that's what I always tried to do and I feel like I know how to do it.

"Honestly, nothing is better to me than when you feel that energy of people. Like I shouldn't be laughing at this, but I still am. I love having that feeling myself as an audience member and I really crave and push for that when I'm making, especially this kind of movie. Those kinds of laughs belong in these kinds of movies. And I love doing that.

"This really is a movie that I think benefits from being seen with a crowd in a big way."

FANTASTIC BEATINGS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

A key element of *Violent Night* is the plethora of inventive kill scenes. Wirkola says that despite them requiring a lot of planning, rehearsal and fight training there were still opportunities for embellishment – such as when he spotted a pair of ice skates and decided "he should really put his hands into them and use them as boxing gloves."

But it wasn't just the director and production who got inventive, he reveals. "Harbour himself had some great ideas for those scenes and how we can make it funnier and how we can improve on this and that."

One of the most ambitious sequences is when Santa takes on over 20 mercenaries – →

Director and actor play with their balls.

Santa prepares for a lovely festive whoopin'.

"Man, I could tell you some stories of back in the day..."

"But fundamentally I am a *good* boy, you see."

yes, really – in a barn. "It was a big sequence and we actually just made it bigger," Wirkola reveals. "I think in the first draft, there were six people coming in. It's not a Marvel movie, we don't have 100 million dollars, we have to spend our budget wisely." He explains that they realised they could up the stakes by putting their extras in different masks and repeatedly sending them in to have seven shades kicked out by Saint Nick.

"That was the scene that we kept shooting forever, because we had that set built and we could just go in and shoot some extra elements when we needed it."

He also highlights a hilarious but realistic *Home Alone* sequence as being crucial to the movie. "I knew if we got that scene right it could be a great moment in the film.

"I think we realised at one point – you're trying to find the voice of the action and the right direction, and how could it feel different and it was staring us in the face all along. When we embraced that, it kind of opened it up. It was like, 'Yeah, we should really, really just embrace Christmas in every fight.' That's why we use the Christmas tree, the Christmas star, the lights, we use that room with all that winter stuff and the ice skates and tinsel. We really try to use Christmas in any way possible in the fights. There was a *lot* of fun trying to use as many of those things and twisting them into our own demented way."

David Harbour, it has to be said, is perfectly cast as Santa Claus. "He truly is," Wirkola agrees. "It sounds like I'm making it up, but I'm not – it was early in the casting process and we were kind of still just throwing names at each other. I can't remember who said David Harbour but as soon as that name dropped, we were looking at each other like, 'Oh, yeah, god, he's perfect. He is our Santa Claus.' We sent it to him right after and a couple of days later, I was Zooming with him and he came on board.

"He's a super nice man and great to work with. But he also has a lot of ideas, creative input. We agreed on one thing straight away, that we can never play this for jokes or try to play it funny as then it won't work. So he really took it seriously. He's played Santa like Shakespeare because that's what makes it as funny as he is.

"He really worked hard to try to give him an arc and give him a journey in this film. He was just fantastic. He also loved the physical aspect of it. He loved to train. He had done a movie right before, he had to be really skinny for it. So

the months leading up to our film, he had to really gain weight and eat a lot at the same time… he was working out a lot to get that Santa belly."

Wirkola says that it was "vital" that their Santa was grounded in the fantastical.

"I first thought it was just a mall Santa or something like that. But when I read it, I thought, 'Yeah, that was key. It's the real Santa, he has some magic and it's a world where he exists. That gives us the way in to make this unique. It gives us the way in to make something different.' The heart of the movie is Santa and Santa's friendship with that little girl and her belief in him and belief in magic and the fact that we can show that it's real. That it exists in that world was so key to the whole thing working. It was also just, personally, fun to play with Santa and his powers – what they are and how we can use that in the action, the character and the journey. Just as a Christmas movie, being able to have that magical spark in there was great."

> **"Yes, it's a weird, dark, crazy Christmas movie, but it still is a Christmas movie"**

As we all know, every truly great holiday movie deserves at least one more crack of the reindeer reins – so could there be more of Harbour's Father Christmas on the snowy horizon? Stranger things have happened with festive films.

"Of course, we mentioned that it would be great to do another one and what if we could do this and that," Wirkola hesitates, "but I'm a great believer in not jinxing things. I don't like talking about that.

"This is a cliché, but it really is true. We did have a great time making this film and it felt like a lot of great things came together. And it certainly feels like it's a character and universe we could explore more.

"One of the things that excited me the most was making a Christmas movie and being a part of that family. Yes, it's a weird, dark, crazy Christmas movie, but it still is a Christmas movie. It certainly will be a different thing than the rest of the December movies this year!" ●

Violent Night is in cinemas from 2 December.

16
34
2
A 13:24:35:00
Violent Night
DIRECTOR TOMMY WIRKOLA
CAMERA MATT WESTON, FAC

More mayhem is about to start. Merry Christmas!

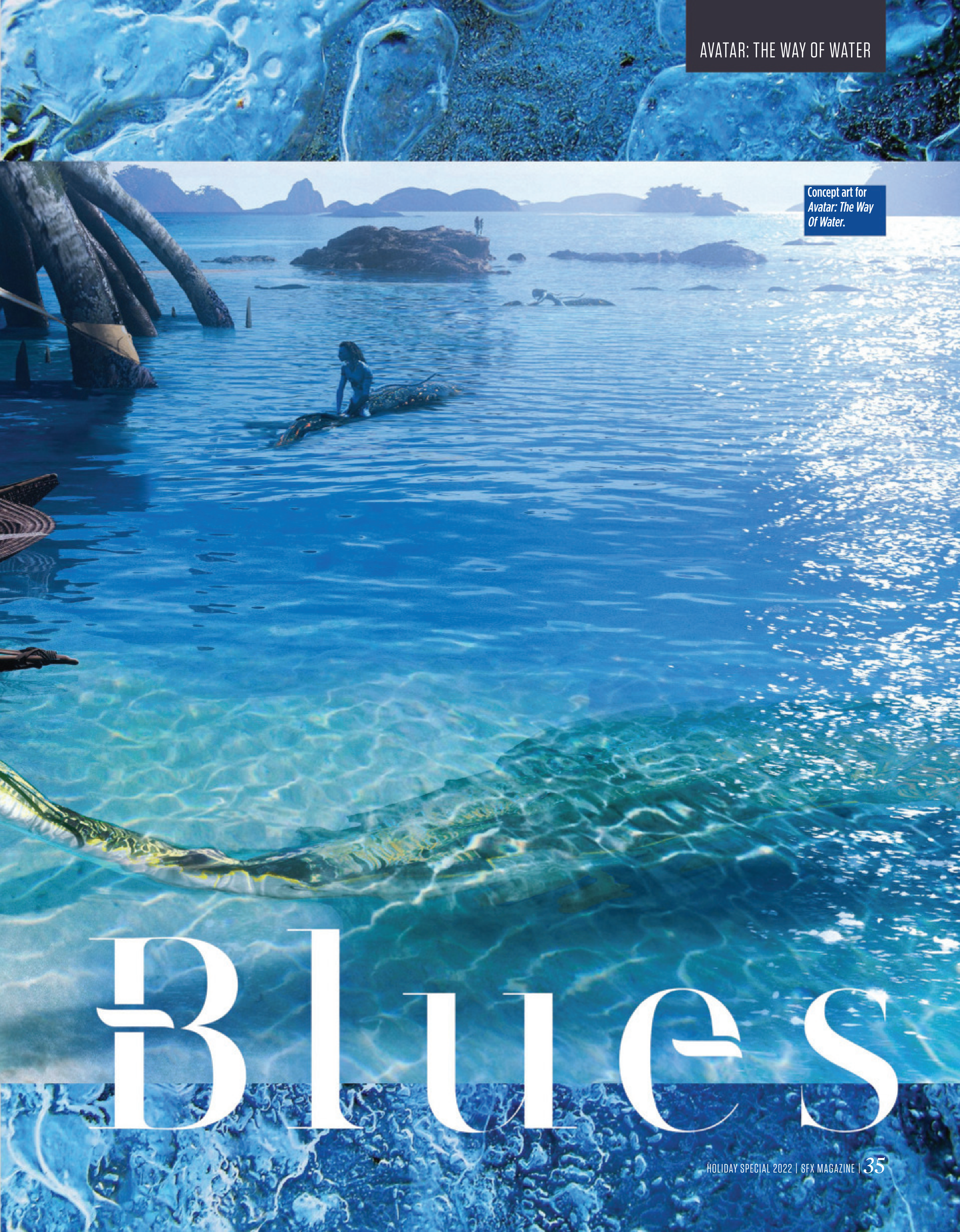
AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER

PRODUCER JON LANDAU AND STAR STEPHEN LANG EXPLAIN WHY JAMES CAMERON IS HEADING BACK TO PANDORA 13 YEARS ON – AND HOW COLONEL QUARITCH CAME BACK FROM THE DEAD

WORDS: **RICHARD EDWARDS**

Na'vi

GETTY



Concept art for *Avatar: The Way Of Water.*

Blues

SOMETIMES THE ONLY PERSON YOU have to beat is yourself. Aside from a brief *Avengers: Endgame*-shaped blip, James Cameron's films have spent the last quarter of a century topping the global box office charts. But where do you go after the awards-laden, cash-hoovering double-whammy of *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar* (2009), a pair of movies that plundered cinematic unobtanium and redefined the concept of a blockbuster?

For the former "king of the world", the answer lay on an alien moon in the vicinity of Alpha Centauri – *after* he'd taken a brief trip to the deepest ocean depths on Earth.

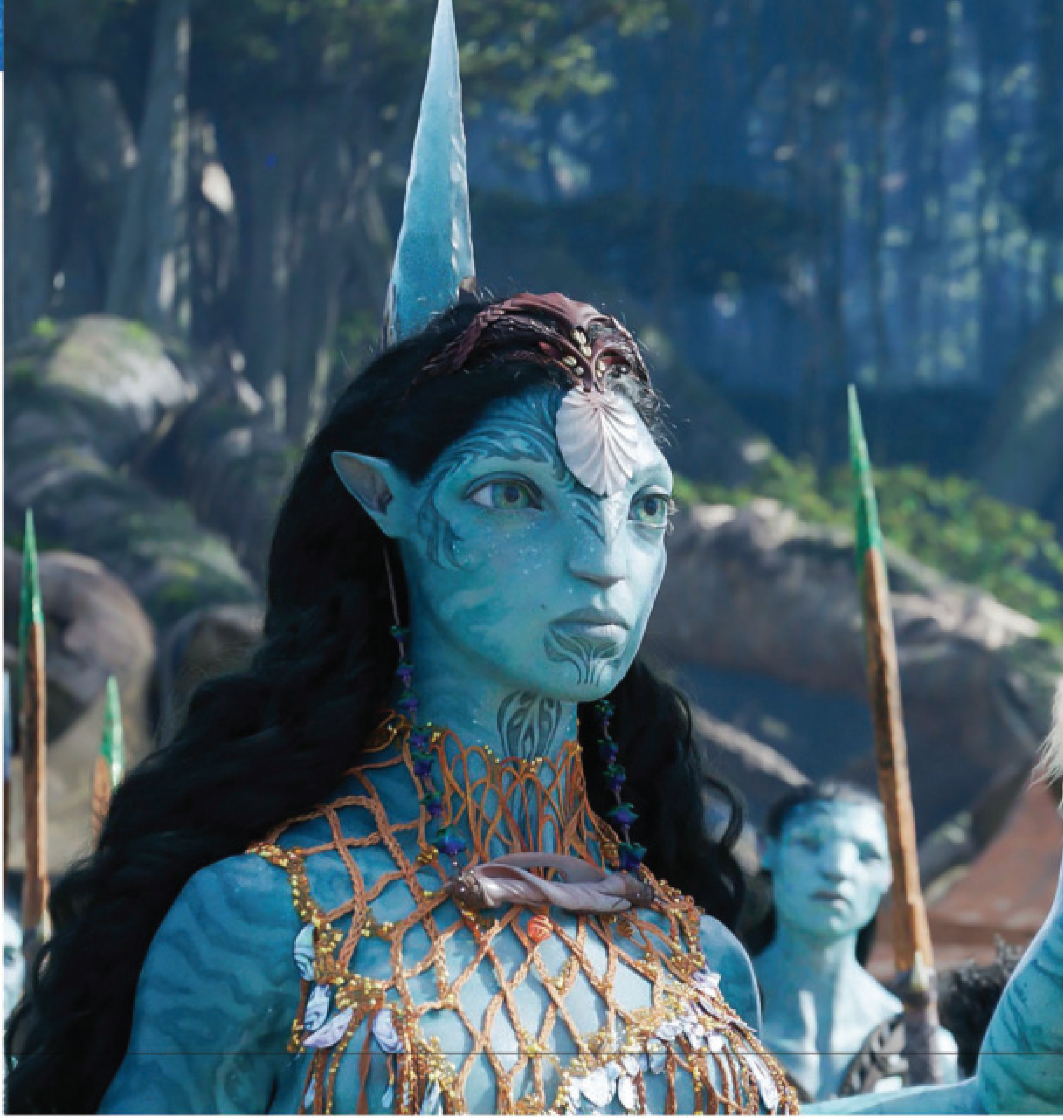
"You know, we wanted to do it again before the first *Avatar* ever came out," Jon Landau, Cameron's long-time producing partner, tells *SFX*. "We identified that there was more that we wanted to tell, but we needed a decompression period after the release of the movie.

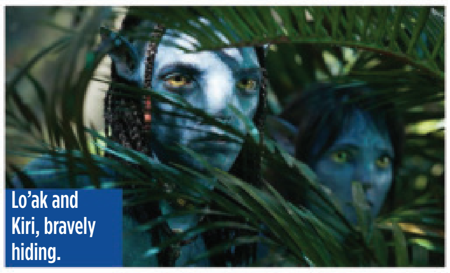
"Also Jim had other ambitions, including going to the Mariana Trench, so it was after the 3D premiere of *Titanic* [in 2012] that Jim really sat down to put pen to paper on the ideas that he had for where he wanted to go."

AVAT4R

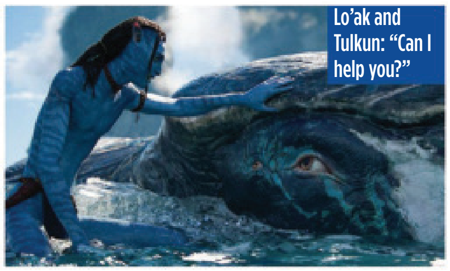
As you'd expect of someone with the clout to defeat Thanos, Cameron has never been a man to do anything by halves. And so a director who's made just two films since 1994's *True Lies* – a release rate so leisurely it would leave even the late Stanley Kubrick looking on in awe – has now embarked on a four-part expedition to Pandora, starting with December's *The Way Of Water*. In a Hollywood where long-running franchises have come to rule the big screen like never before, Cameron is about to unleash one of his own.

"[Early on], Jim had identified that he wanted to make three movies, and felt that he had a plethora of directions to go in those," explains Landau. "Then, when he started working with teams of writers to take his 1,000-plus pages of notes and coalesce them into stories, he realised we couldn't get it down

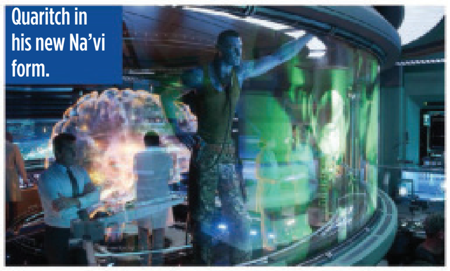




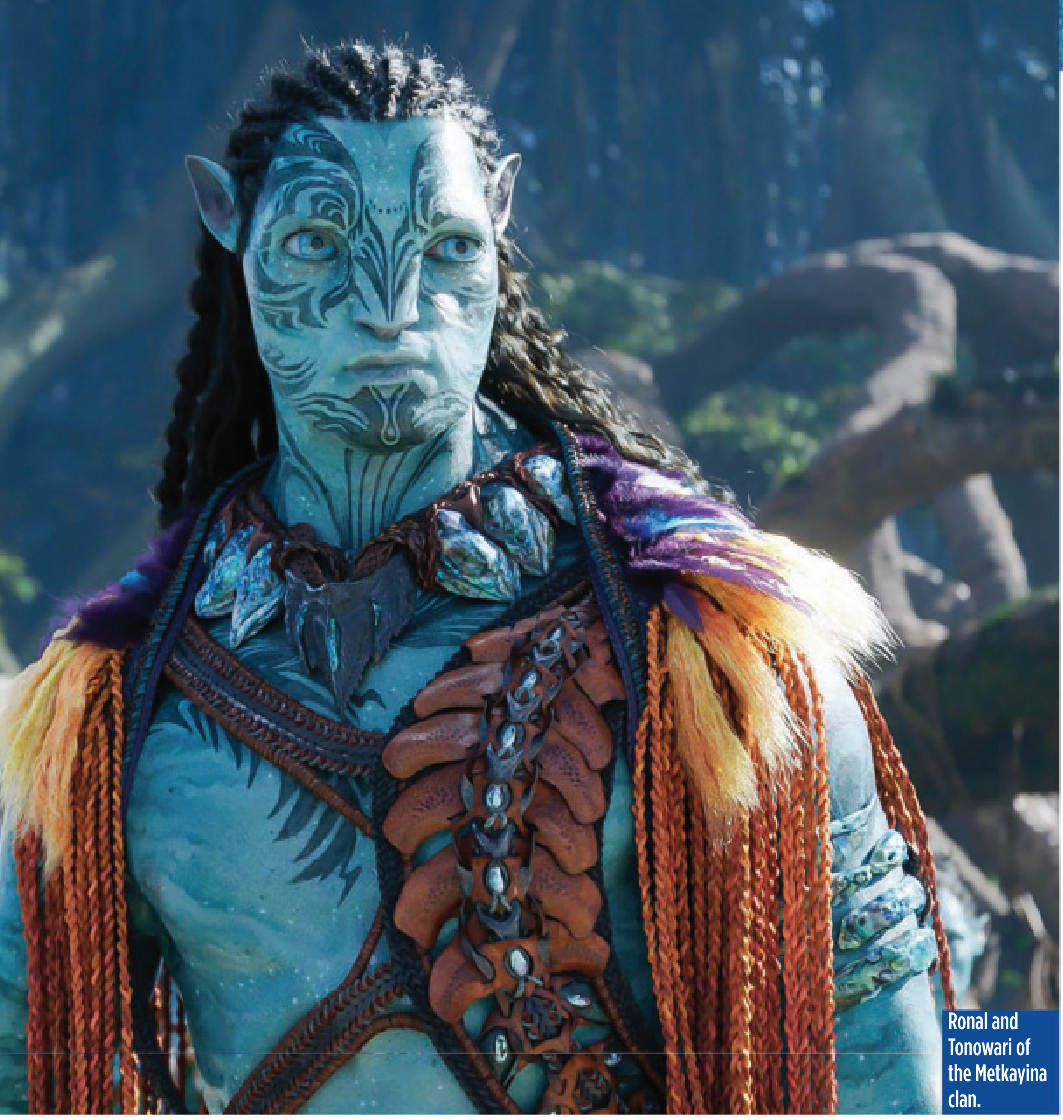
Lo'ak and Kiri, bravely hiding.



Lo'ak and Tulkun: "Can I help you?"



Quaritch in his new Na'vi form.


Ronal and Tonowari of the Metkayina clan.

Director James Cameron behind the scenes.

to three movies, that there were really four unique stories to tell."

This is probably a good time to mention that *Avatar* isn't about to turn into some *Star Wars*-style saga, where the five chapters run together in one big, blue soap opera.

"I guess a really good analogy to think about is: did you need to have seen *Top Gun* to enjoy *Top Gun: Maverick*?" says Landau. "If you really look at those two stories together, Maverick has gone on an arc across both movies, and this is that same type of thing. We're just doing it over four films."

Surrounded by Earth's mightiest heroes, galaxies far, far away and numerous Pixar/Disney animation smash hits, *Avatar* and *Titanic* are outliers among the biggest movies of all time. But *Avatar* also differs from the herd because, despite its box-office dominance, it's never really made a mark on fandom in the same way as *Star Wars* or the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Sure, you'll see the odd brave soul donning blue body paint and a tail to cosplay as a Na'vi at comic cons, but the film has rarely been top of the collective pop culture conversation.

In fact, in the 13 years since *Avatar* first packed out cinemas, a perception has

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THE SON RISES

Jamie Flatters on playing Jake and Neytiri's eldest, Neteyam

What can you tell us about Neteyam and how he fits into the Sully family?
Neteyam is the eldest son of Jake and Neytiri. He's often taking responsibility for all the other Sully kids, and the trouble they get into from their dad. That creates quite an interesting, antagonistic relationship between him and his father.

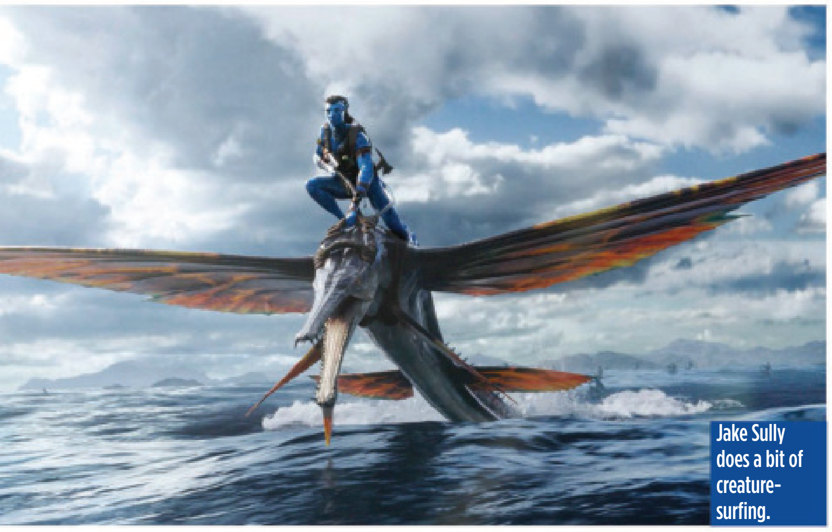
Sorry to destroy the illusion for *SFX* readers, but you're not really 10 feet tall. Was it a challenge to learn to move like a Na'vi?
Jim [Cameron] gave us the privilege of working with movement coaches, and we had stunt guys on hand to teach us a plethora of skills. I actually left a touring dance group in order to join the *Avatar* filming experience, so to still have a connection to movement and be able to make it such an integral part of the character was really enjoyable.

How did you find the freediving?
I think the freediving thing was also a great allegory for the wider *Avatar* experience – it's like you could only find the scene if you found the peace to hold your breath, because if you don't find the peace, your heartbeat is going to go and you're never going to be able to do the scene. So the freediving was extremely challenging – a couple of blackouts, but we got the scenes done! [laughs]

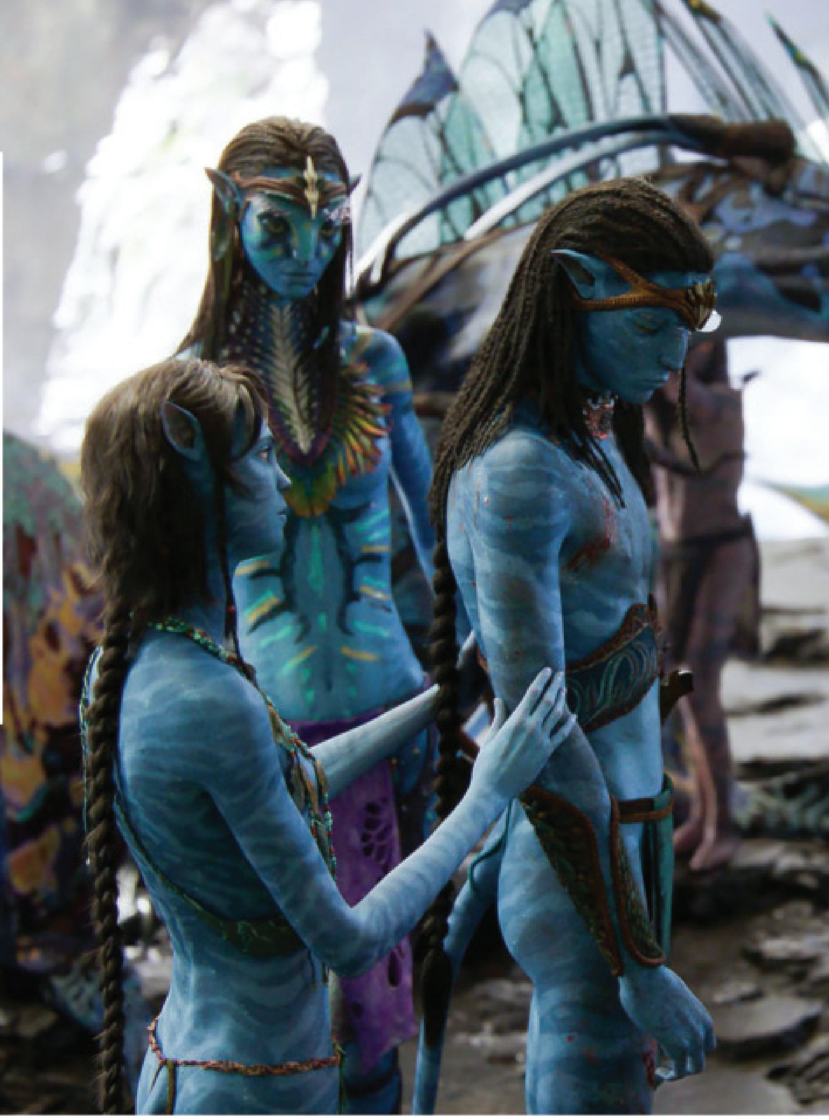
Does Neteyam feel like a child of two worlds?
I think that's the question I was constantly asking in trying to create this character. Jim almost left the line up to me, but he always told me that Neteyam will be the one who's closest to his mother, that his culture is home to him. Therefore I found it imperative to focus on Zoe [Saldaña]'s performance in the first film instead of trying to derive my temperament from what Sam Worthington did. I think the idea that Neteyam is torn between two worlds comes from his need to pull the siblings closer towards the family home, when they're willing to go out and be the hero like their father.

Do you have any idea where your character goes in the later *Avatar* films?
I'm very aware of where my character goes, but in terms of wider scope and interpersonal relationships with other characters, that's been left a mystery. I think that was quite an interesting way for Jim to handle it. I know it's in a different part of the film world but I really like Mike Leigh, who keeps secrets between actors, because each actor doesn't need to know everything about the world they're living in.

COREY NICKOLS/GETTY



Jake Sully does a bit of creature-surfing.



Kiri, Neytiri, Neteyam, Lo'ak, Tuk and Jake.

grown that the movie's unprecedented success owed more to its unquestionable technical razzle dazzle (more on that later) than any particular storytelling prowess – that audiences were more drawn in by groundbreaking 3D visuals than its interstellar *Romeo And Juliet* plotting.

Although *Avatar* isn't up there with Cameron's best – no crime when your filmography includes *Aliens* and the first two *Terminators* – it's way better than the "*Pocahontas* with space Smurfs" some would have you believe. The film's environmental message (while heavy-handed) feels more relevant than ever, while there's something timeless about human marine Jake Sully's (Sam Worthington) unlikely romance with local girl Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña). Besides, the final shot of Jake waking up, his consciousness permanently transferred to his avatar Na'vi body, left the door wide open for a sequel. This follow-up picks things up with Jake and Neytiri several years later, and now they have a family of their own.

> **“I always tell people that Jim has the uncanny ability to write in universal themes”**

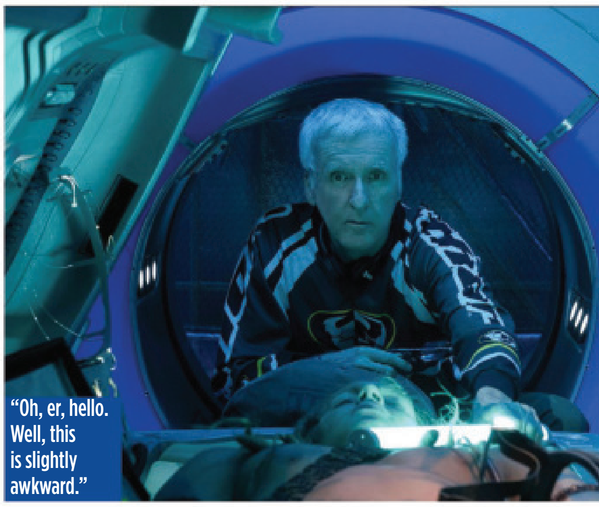
"I think going with the Sullies as a family unit was a natural evolution," says Landau. "We always saw Neytiri as pregnant at the end of the first film, and if we were picking up this story, you couldn't ignore that fact. I always tell people that Jim has the uncanny ability to write in universal themes, themes that are bigger than the genre. There's no more universal theme than family, so it was a natural progression."

The Sully clan has grown considerably in the years since the first *Avatar*. As well as Jake and Neytiri's own kids – Neteyam (Jamie Flatters), Lo'ak (Britain Dalton) and Tuktirey (Trinity Bliss) – there are two adopted additions to the brood. Spider (Jack Champion) is a human orphan who has to wear a mask to breathe Pandora's poisonous air, while the teenage Kiri looks and sounds a bit like the Na'vi avatar of late scientist Dr Grace Augustine – which perhaps isn't surprising, seeing as she's played by the returning Sigourney Weaver. (We won't say anything about the connection between the characters to avoid spoilers.)

Although – with the exception of Spider – the Sully kids look like Na'vi, they straddle the two worlds of their parents, with Earth tech in their home and regular interactions with the few humans (such as Joel David Moore's Norm) who stayed behind after the defeat of the Resources Development Administration (RDA).

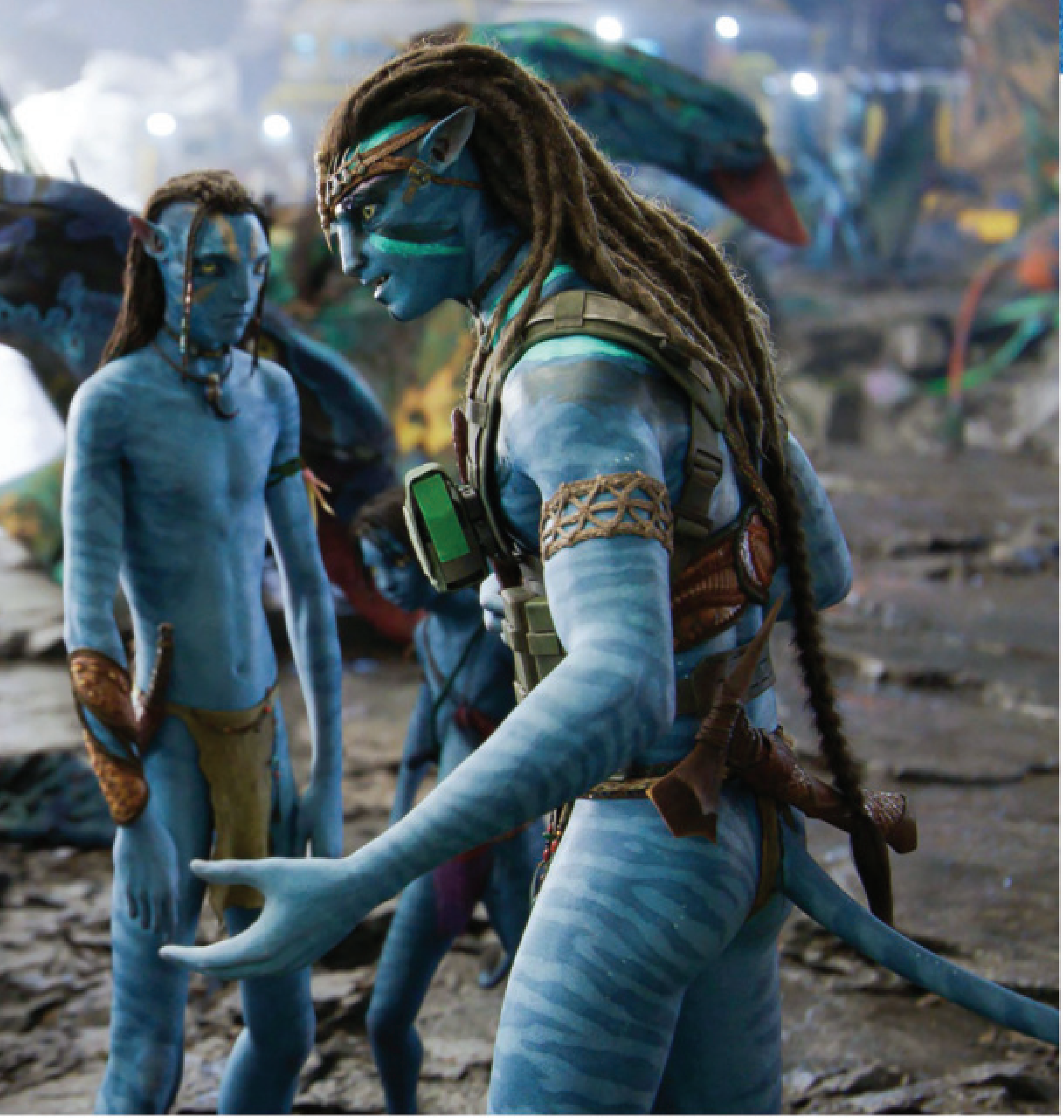
"One of the things that plays out in the movie is the fact they are mixed-race kids," explains Landau. "Their mother loves them dearly but when she looks at Spider, she sees a pink skin like the one who killed her father. And when the Sully children are born, Lo'ak has five digits, where Na'vis don't [they have four fingers on each hand], so he's like an outsider too. You start talking about these things and go, 'Wow, that's like what's going on outside in our world today.'"

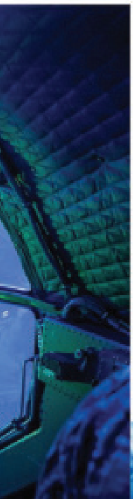
While the returns of Jake and Neytiri always seemed inevitable, the future didn't look quite so rosy for Colonel Miles Quaritch (Stephen

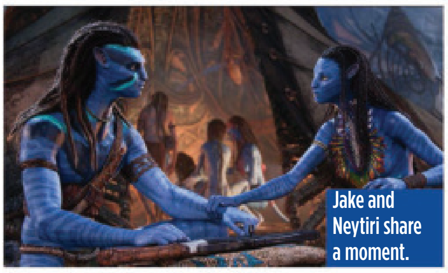


"Oh, er, hello. Well, this is slightly awkward."

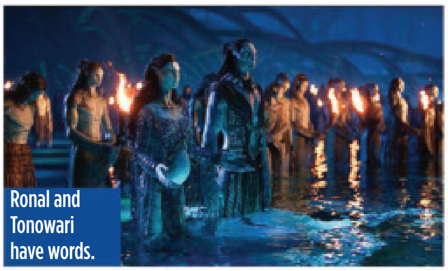
Cameron with Edie Falco (General Ardmore).



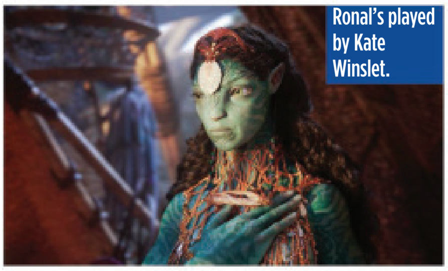




Jake and Neytiri share a moment.



Ronal and Tonowari have words.



Ronal's played by Kate Winslet.

Lang) – after all, the head of security at the human settlement of Hell's Gate finished the movie with two massive Na'vi arrows sticking out of his chest. Nonetheless, he's become a reminder that in sci-fi, if death really does spell the end for your character, you should probably have a word with your agent.

"I've been aware of the sequels and my role in them since when we released the original *Avatar*," says Lang. "For so many years, I was forbidden to say a word, but then all of a sudden the cat gets out of the bag and everybody sees that Quaritch is in a Na'vi body, that he's 12-foot tall and he's blue."

It turns out that, in the years since the original movie, the RDA and the military have developed new technology that allows them to embed the memories of deceased soldiers into "Recombinant" (or Recom) avatar bodies.

"Quaritch's DNA had been banked," Lang explains, "and obviously in the process of building the avatar, he goes through the same thing that they did with Jake or with Grace Augustine, to become Na'vi. But there's no going back for him, because he's dead and there's no body to go back to.

"He's not resurrected, he's reconstituted, and what emerges is very much the DNA of Quaritch. But there's also this addition, this Pandoran lifeforce, which I think ultimately is traceable to [Na'vi deity] Eywa. That means he's got a lot of Pandora inside him now, and

→

I HEARD YOU WERE DEAD

Colonel Quaritch joins a long list of unlikely resurrections in sci-fi

JAMES T KIRK

(*Star Trek Into Darkness*)

We'd got so used to Spock's resurrection in *The Search For Spock* that Kirk's Kelvin Universe demise never seemed likely to stick. Using Khan's genetically augmented blood was as obvious as it was implausible, and one of many missteps in this mediocre retread of *The Wrath Of Khan*.

EMPEROR PALPATINE

(*Star Wars: The Rise Of Skywalker*)

He fell down a very deep reactor shaft on a Death Star that subsequently exploded, so there should have been no way back for the most evil man in the galaxy. Even so, a combination of cloning, Force-y mumbo-jumbo and some zealots known as the Sith Eternal helped bring the Skywalker Saga to a disappointing conclusion.

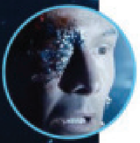
PROFESSOR XAVIER

(The *X-Men* movies)

Screen deaths don't come more definitive than being vaporised by Jean Grey (herself a member of the improbable resurectee club), but Professor Xavier returned nonetheless. The end of the risible *The Last Stand* hinted that Xavier's consciousness had survived, but *Days Of Future Past* never bothered to explain how he then reconstituted Patrick Stewart's body.

NEO

(*The Matrix Resurrections*)



Trailers and the movie's title made it inevitable that Neo would come back from the dead a second time, but his return still made little narrative sense – something to do with the Machines repairing his body and reinserting his consciousness into a new Matrix to maintain control. Undeniably ridiculous but far from the biggest leap of logic in the franchise.

TOO MANY TO MENTION

(The Marvel Cinematic Universe)

Unless you're an all-out villain, staying dead in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is considerably more challenging than finding some convenient route to resurrection. Agent Coulson, Bucky Barnes, Pepper Potts and Groot have all exploited narrative loopholes to prolong their involvement in the MCU, but no one can compete with Loki in death-dodging.

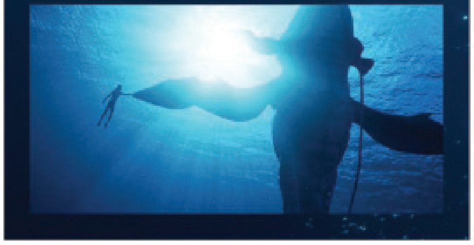
© DISNEY, PARAMOUNT, WARNER BROS, FOX. ALAMY (1)

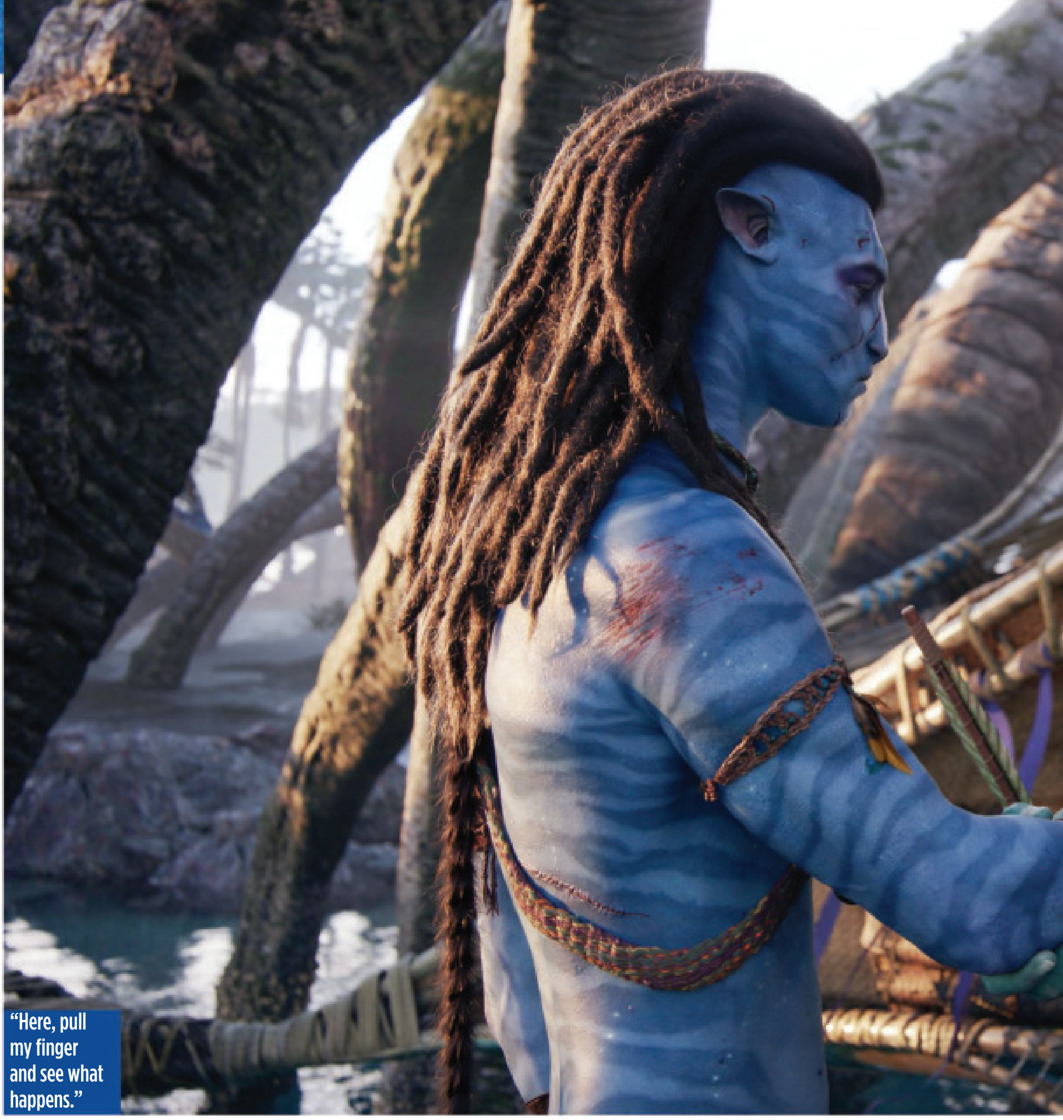
ONE WORLD

Will *Avatar 2* take us to other planets?

We know that life exists on Earth and Pandora, but will *The Way Of Water* introduce us to other wonders of the universe? With *Avatar* taking a rather different approach to geographical diversity than the one-ecosystem-fits-all planets of *Star Wars*, it seems the franchise will keep the strange new worlds to a minimum.

"There was a point in time where we thought, 'Should we go to another planet?'" admits producer Jon Landau. "We realised that while other science fiction movies might go to the ocean planet if they wanted water, or the ice planet if they wanted snow, Earth has all of the wonders you can possibly imagine. We could spend our whole lives exploring Earth to discover its wonders in terms of cultures and locations. So we said that if we want our movies really to be a metaphor for our world, we can set everything on Pandora, but just continue to venture out and meet new clans, meet new creatures and see new biomes."





"Here, pull my finger and see what happens."

that's a very, very weird thing for Quaritch." He may be bigger and bluer than we remember him – and *slightly* more in touch with nature – but that doesn't mean Quaritch has significantly changed from a guy who was so focused on his mission that he ran out into the toxic Pandoran atmosphere without a mask to take down a Na'vi threat.

"He's still as relentless as ever," Lang confirms, "but there's something that's been added to the mix. As written, the original Quaritch is a right-angle character. He moves in straight lines, and that's the way he thinks as well. But I've always thought of Pandora as an extremely curvaceous place, as a flexible place, as a place with a lot of life, a lot of movement. And I think he is a canny enough warrior to know that he needs to change his style to fit the type of war that he is going to fight.

> "I think if you wait for the technology, you're going to fall behind the wave"

"I did a different type of training for this than I did for the first one, involving a lot of parkour, which is about moving stealthily and nimbly. Not everything is going to be at right angles for him any more."

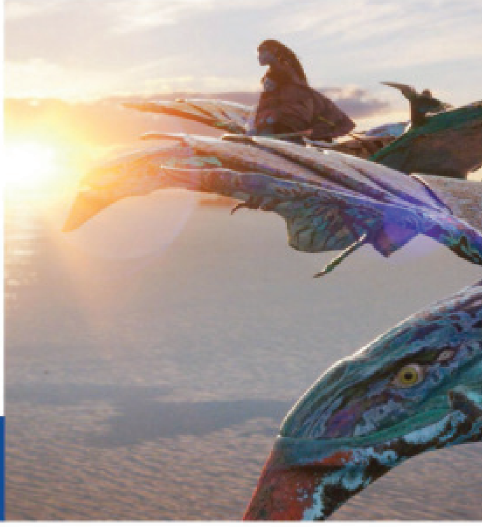
Given the disdain he showed towards the Na'vi throughout the first movie, becoming one in *The Way Of Water* must be something of an existential crisis? "Yeah, it's the existential crisis of all existential crises!" Lang laughs. "However, I think that one of his ways of dealing with it is avoidance and denial."

DEEPER AND DOWN

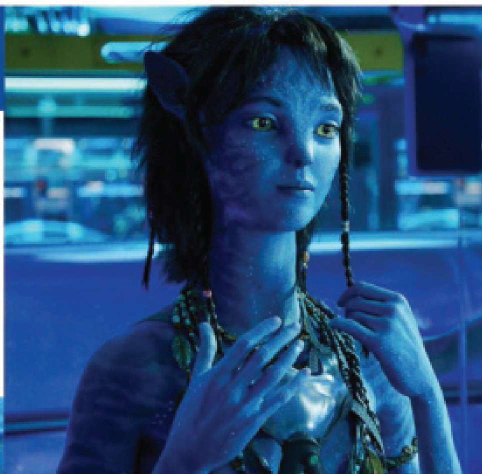
However you felt about the first *Avatar*'s plot, nobody could question the quality of the visuals. Mixing state of the art 3D photography with groundbreaking performance capture technology, Cameron raised the bar so high that much of Hollywood is still trying to catch up over a decade later.

"I find it fascinating how they did the first *Avatar*," says Jamie Flatters (who plays Neteyam). "How, as an actor, would you be able to visualise what you're doing if you didn't have any reference point [from previous films]? I'm just so lucky that we came in for the second one, so we already had such a rich basis to take things from."

Second time out, however, Cameron's moved things up a notch. Not only will we see Na'vi running around on dry land, the introduction of new sea-dwelling tribe the Metkayina (led by Kate Winslet's Ronal and Cliff Curtis's Tonowari) meant taking the performance



Neytiri and Jake are off to do a big shop. Maybe.



Kiri and Dr Augustine (Sigourney Weaver).

capture underwater. A nice idea with one small problem: nobody had ever done it before.

"I think if you wait for the technology, you're going to fall behind the wave," says Landau. "But if you can be the impetus for the wave, that wave can give you a long, long ride. I think oftentimes people make a mistake, and they go, 'Oh, technology exists, let me tell a story that can utilise that technology', but that's the cart leading the horse. Here, we said this is the story we want to tell, and if we surround ourselves with people who are smarter in their disciplines than I could ever be, we will accomplish it.

"We have people like [visual production supervisor] Ryan Champney, who figured out how to do the underwater capture. That's hard, but what's even harder is capturing things above the water, at the water's surface and below in the same moment. People like Ryan figured it out for us."

Even in an arena as technologically advanced as *Avatar*, VFX geniuses can't do everything. It turns out that the air bubbles from scuba-diving equipment wreak havoc with motion-capture rigs, meaning the cast had to learn to hold their breath for lung-busting periods of time.

Winslet famously stayed underwater for over seven minutes, surpassing the six Tom Cruise managed on *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation*. "I did the freediving training, and I thought I was doing pretty good," laughs Lang. "I could hold my breath for four and a half minutes – I think I've gone over that at times – and then Kate Winslet jumps in and the first time she does it, she's like seven minutes! It's like, 'Oh, maybe I'm not as good as I thought I was!'

"But there are many, many characters and creatures in *The Way Of Water* for whom the water is home. They feel completely at ease and completely comfortable in there and protected and safe, whereas Quaritch would generally prefer not to be in the water."

DIMENSION JUMP

In September, *SFX* was treated to a screening of early footage from *The Way Of Water*. We were reminded of the feeling when we first watched *Avatar* in 2009, that sense that a rectangular hole had been carved into the side of a cinema and we were simply looking through to Pandora. It also felt like a blast from the past to be wearing a pair of 3D specs – remember those?

It wasn't supposed to be that way. *Avatar* was heralded as the film to kickstart a 3D revolution that never came to pass. Indeed, after several years when every blockbuster seemed to receive augmentation from the third dimension – and we had to pay a little extra on our cinema tickets for the privilege – flatness is now once again the default standard on the big screen. What went wrong?

"How it's panned out for the embrace of *quality* 3D has been great," Landau says. "I think that Hollywood made some mistakes and thought that 3D would make a bad movie good. It doesn't. 3D exacerbates, and if you have something that's bad, it's going to make it look worse. 3D is a creative process, not a technical process, so when you try to post-convert something, and you're trying to do it through some automated process in a very short period of time, you're going to end up with something that looks like caca. But I think if you look at movies like *Hugo* or *The Life Of Pi*, the 3D made those movies better."

Even beyond the 3D and the technical advances, *The Way Of Water* seems to be playing to Cameron's strengths: he has an excellent track record with sequels and directing kids (see *Aliens* and *Terminator 2*), while *Titanic* broke the curse that's befallen many Hollywood movies made on water. He also has a formidable track record for *Avatar* movies, with his first trip to Pandora rapidly closing in on $3 billion dollars at the box office.

If history teaches us anything, it's that you should never bet against James Cameron – when it comes to blockbuster spectacle, there aren't many who can compete against him.

Avatar: The Way Of Water is in cinemas from 16 December.

COME TO DUST

THE BBC'S BOLD AND BRILLIANT ADAPTATION OF HIS DARK MATERIALS IS BACK FOR ITS THIRD AND FINAL SERIES. SFX VISITS THE SET ONE LAST TIME

WORDS: **WILL SALMON**

Lyra (Dafne Keen) and Mrs Coulter (Ruth Wilson).

THERE'S A WAR BREWING IN HEAVEN. On the one side is God – or at least the being that has assumed His holy mantle. On the other, an arrogant, occasionally murderous, mortal man who plans to assassinate the supreme being and reforge reality. Which side would you choose?

For Lyra Belacqua, the young hero of Philip Pullman's iconoclastic fantasy trilogy – and the BBC's lavish TV adaptation, about to air its third and final season – the answer is somewhat complicated. The man, you see, is her father, Lord Asriel (James McAvoy). He's not been a great dad, having kept his fatherhood secret for most of her life, taken off on adventures for months at a time and, uh, killed her best friend Roger.

Then again, the Authority and its tyrannical agents, the Magisterium, are surely worse – and they've put a target on Lyra's head, believing her to be a threat to their continued dominance. Talk about being caught between Hell and a hard place...

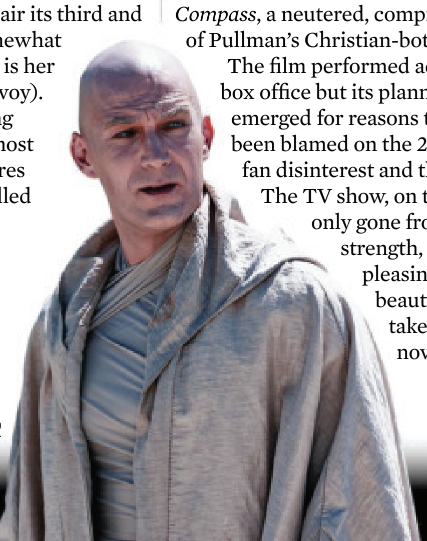
The Amber Spyglass – the last book of Pullman's trilogy – is a big novel in both scope and ideas, and it makes up the entirety of these final eight episodes. Adapting it for TV was no mean feat, but then the fact that this series exists at all is something of a miracle, after all. Hollywood tried and failed to adapt *His Dark Materials* back in 2007 with *The Golden Compass*, a neutered, compromised version of Pullman's Christian-bothering vision.

The film performed adequately at the box office but its planned sequels never emerged for reasons that have alternately been blamed on the 2008 financial crisis, fan disinterest and the Catholic church. The TV show, on the other hand, has only gone from strength to strength, offering both a pleasingly faithful and beautifully realised take on Pullman's novels. Making it, however, proved to be a learning curve for everyone involved.

"Honestly, I'm surprised at how little we knew going into this," admits executive producer Dan McCulloch, reflecting on the origins of the series. "As [series writer] Jack Thorne was beavering away on the many drafts of episode one, the scope of TV production changed completely. We had to compete with the rise of the level that people expect these kinds of shows to be made at. The goalposts were just wholly moved in the first two years we were working on it.

"HBO [who co-produce the show with Bad Wolf] only joined a few weeks into the shoot and we were running to catch up with how they expected a big show to be run. They'd made *Game Of Thrones* by this point, but that was wholly owned and this was a co-production with the BBC, so very different. We had to start filming and then make the expectation of where we were taking it meet reality. It was quite crazy."

The second season, meanwhile, fell prey to the restrictions imposed during the first



GETTY

Ruth Wilson gets gussied up for another scene…

… while Dafne Keen has a rather more languid one.

James McAvoy and Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje.

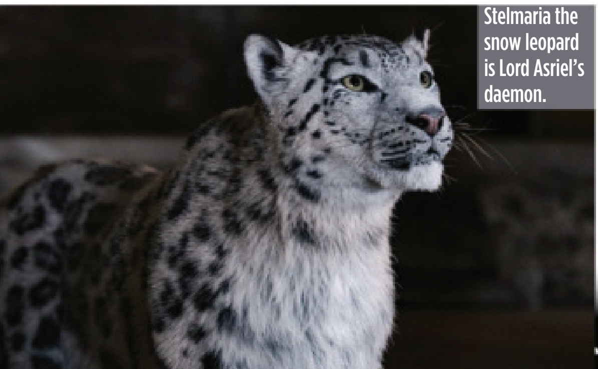
lockdown. "We had to shut down season two and that had a real effect on the show in that we lost an episode," says McCulloch, referring to an instalment which would have followed Lord Asriel. Consequently, James McAvoy appears only briefly in season two. "We had really strict protocols that were put in place for all the right reasons and people were brilliant about it. They just worked through it. It was a phenomenal effort across many departments and many hundreds of people."

Despite these challenges, *His Dark Materials* has only grown in scale. It's a genuine accomplishment that this series has been able to adapt Pullman's trilogy both so faithfully and so stylishly. The show's many "daemons" (animals that represent each human character's inner self) are represented on-set by beautifully made puppets and later completed digitally. The sets in Cardiff's Wolf Studios, as *SFX* witnesses first hand, are staggeringly huge and minutely detailed.

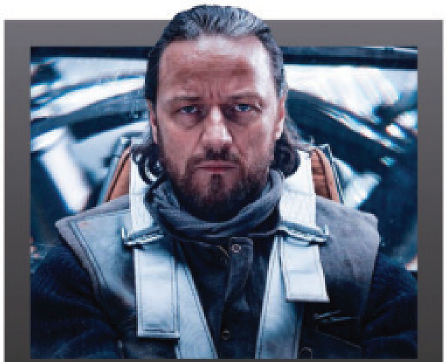
"It freaks people out that we made so much of the show here on the backlot," laughs series production designer Joel Collins. Cittàgazze [the haunted city from season two] was built entirely here. Eight months of design, nine months of building and the result was most people just assumed we had filmed abroad! If we'd written 'set' on the walls, we'd have won awards!"

But if you thought that the show's first two seasons were big, you ain't seen nothing yet. Guided by Collins, we're led into an enormous cavern, hemmed in by tall faces of blackened rock – in fact, spray-painted polystyrene. As we're inspecting the walls we notice something strange – there are objects sticking out of the "rock". There's a toy car here, the arm of a doll there, the detritus of humanity washed up in the gloomy Land of the Dead.

Later, we visit the steampunk sprawl of Asriel's workshop and pay a visit to the world →



Stelmaria the snow leopard is Lord Asriel's daemon.



POWER TO THE PEOPLE

James McAvoy on Asriel's revolution

What have you enjoyed about being a part of this show?

Getting to play a character that I have spent a lot of time with and loved reading. I've read these books three times and, as much as Asriel comes in and goes out of the books, he was one of the main things about them that stuck with me. The person casting the show is one of my best mates. We had a really good conversation about the show and who could play the characters, and my name never came up! Then six months later she was like, "Hey, how would you feel about playing Asriel?" I was like, "Who dropped out?" But honestly, getting to play him was a dream come true. I've had that a few times in my career. Getting to play Mr Tumnus and Leto Atreides II and Professor X. As a fan of these properties, I've lived many dreams.

Where is Asriel at emotionally in season three?

He's like a train that won't stop and it's going to smash through everything to get what he thinks is right done. But his arc is really about unpicking that, about slowing down and ultimately going from thinking "I'm the centre of the universe" to "It was never about me, it was about the girl". He thinks he's the shit. He thinks he's the messiah. He thinks he's Spartacus – but actually, his daughter is Spartacus!

How is his relationship with Lyra now?

She's not the little girl that wants to be loved by her daddy any more, she's got rid of that. And in a way that makes her more like him. She challenges him even when she's not with him. She's constantly challenging his ego and, in a way, whilst he's trying to fight the Authority, she's the biggest challenge to his position.

James has a chat with his puppeteer.

Dafne and Amir: the end begins.

THE INNOCENTS

Dafne Keen and Amir Wilson on Lyra and Will's journey

You share some really big emotional moments this season. What are they like to play?

DAFNE: I really enjoy them. I feel like as an actor, when they cut, you have to smile and make sure that everyone knows that you're okay, you're not having a meltdown! In those scenes it's always about finding that balance between what's melodramatic, what's a breaking point and what would actually be happening and try to make it as human as possible.

What unites Will and Lyra?

AMIR: They've both been through the same experiences and they both come from a background where they've been quite isolated, so they can talk to each other about those things and I think that's why they like each other.

How has Lyra changed over the last three seasons?

DAFNE: She starts off as a pretty selfish, self-centred child and basically it's a trip to becoming the best version of herself and realising that it's not all about what she feels like doing. When she gets to season three, she's found a balance between doing what she wants and what has to be done and not damaging herself. I think she's become stronger.

How do you both feel to be coming to the end of this journey?

AMIR: It's a bit upsetting. It's gone so fast. You build a bond with the cast and crew members. It's gonna be a shame to leave some of these guys because we've kind of built up a connection and you really get used to each other.

DAFNE: I'm happy that we got to tell the story and I'm happy that I think it's going to look good, but I am sad because I have spent a long time with these people and it's just really strange thinking that's coming to an end. It's a big part of my life suddenly disappearing. But we'll always have the show to account for it, so it's not like it's done and gone and there's no memory of it.

of the mulefa, a memorably bizarre alien species. We witness an emotional scene being filmed between Will and astrophysicist Mary Malone (Simone Kirby) that's filmed amid the roots of an enormous (and entirely fake) tree. It's so realistic that a bird has started nesting in its branches.

"They're starting to understand the extraordinary tasks that they've set themselves, and the meaning of that," says Dan McCulloch of Lyra and Will. "And for the first time, we're starting to see them as much more complicated characters who have different agendas."

Those different agendas come from the duo's seemingly divergent interests. At the start of the season Will is "doggedly searching every world for Lyra in the hope that he can rescue her from her mother," but he also has a grander quest. As the bearer of the subtle knife Æsahættr, he has been tasked with delivering this reality-slicing weapon to Asriel to aid in his mission to dethrone the Authority… with prejudice.

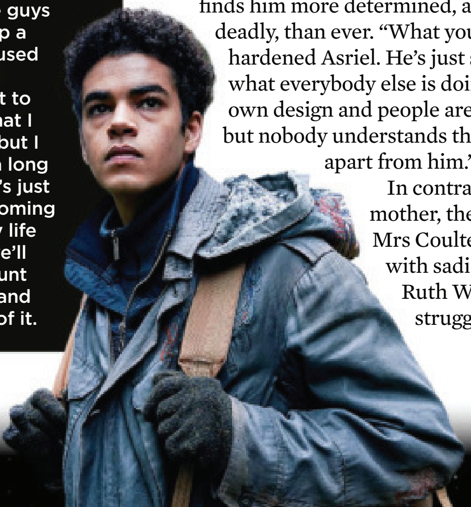
HEAVEN'S ABOVE

Lyra, on the other hand, is more concerned with reuniting with the soul of her dead friend Roger. "Something that Jack Thorne always said about Lyra and the reason why he wanted to tell her story is that he'd worked on the *Harry Potter* play and a series of projects that were about destiny. And then, finally, here was this character that thought about goodness over greatness. That's certainly what we see with Lyra and the journey that she persuades Will to go on before he can complete his mission."

That relationship is mirrored in Lyra's parents, McCulloch explains. After being forced to largely sit out season two, James McAvoy is back in a big way.

"He's completely dedicated himself in a kind of almost kamikaze-like way to making the universe equal," says McCulloch. He's on this trajectory, like an Exocet missile, heading towards the Clouded Mountain [the seat of the Authority's power]. It's a bit like glimpsing lightning – he moves extraordinarily quickly."

While Asriel has always been a man for whom making the hard choice was never a problem, McCulloch says that season three finds him more determined, and more deadly, than ever. "What you see is a hardened Asriel. He's just so ahead of what everybody else is doing. He has his own design and people are part of that, but nobody understands the whole design apart from him."



Iorek Byrnison, a panserbjørn and king.

Lord Asriel Stelmaria and Ogunwe: what on earth?

The mulefa design has changed from the books.

In contrast, Lyra's mother, the villainous Mrs Coulter – played with sadistic glee by Ruth Wilson – is struggling to reconcile her loyalties to the Magisterium and the unexpected feelings of love that she has started to develop for her daughter.

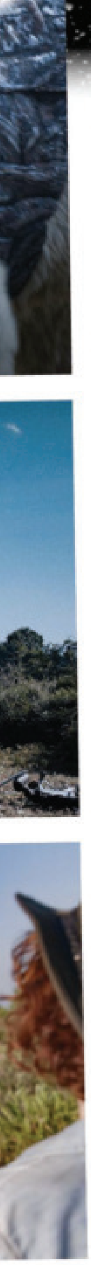
> "They're starting to understand the extraordinary tasks that they've set themselves"

"Where Asriel is single-minded, Coulter is complex in terms of how she perceives events and how she wants to protect her daughter and the meaning of the prophecy behind her," McCulloch says, referring to the revelation that Lyra is effectively a second Eve who could, if she survives, return free will to humanity.

"She wants to protect her from it as much as she wants to understand it. And she goes on the most incredible character arc. We always said that Coulter's story is the most astonishing arc and the fact that [Pullman] manages to get it done in just three books is no mean feat, considering where she starts out."

But as vast as the events facing our two teenage heroes are, they also face something

GETTY



Balthamos (Kobna Holdbrook-Smith).

more personal and altogether more terrifying: their hormones. "This is the season where Will and Lyra realise that they 'love' each other," says Amir Wilson. "I say it in inverted commas because they are both still kids, but it's their version of love."

"They've been through so much together," agrees Dafne Keen. "They literally go to the underworld together, they meet each other's people, and they go on this whole big journey. They've never had anyone else, apart from maybe Will's mum, and for Lyra, Roger. So their feelings are confusing, and it's just about waiting for that moment when they realise that they're in love."

"It's the emotional stories that we're really most excited about," agrees Jane Tranter, CEO of Bad Wolf. "For people who know the books there's the scene where Lyra and Will journey to the Land of the Dead and what happens there between Lyra and Pan, which is very emotional. And there's what happens with Lyra and Will. The visual effects are absolutely stunning and I hope people really respond to them, but it's the emotional stories that are the ones that are the most thrilling."

"What happens with Lyra and Will..." Fans of the books will know exactly what Tranter is referring to there (in episode eight, in case you're wondering). But while season three marks a definite conclusion to the trilogy, it might not be the last we see of Lyra Belacqua.

Seventeen years after the publication of *The Amber Spylgass*, Pullman published *La Belle Sauvage*, the first of a new trilogy that acts as both a prequel and a sequel to *His Dark Materials*. He followed it up in 2019 with *The Secret Commonwealth*, and is currently writing the as-yet-untitled third book. Might we one day see that adapted to the screen as well?

"I think we've made no secret of the fact that we'd love to do it," says Tranter. "One of the things we found really helpful on *His Dark Materials* was being able to look across all three novels at the same time to know where the journey is going. I think we have to wait and see how the third season lands, we have to wait to see when Philip will finish the book. But obviously, we'd love to do it."

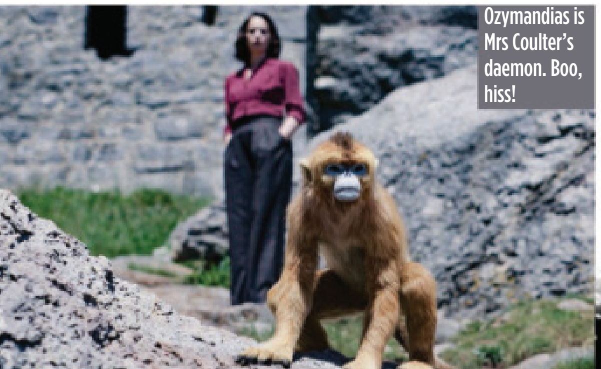
And speaking of the great creator, what has he made of the series' efforts over the last few years in bringing his books to the screen?

"He's seen the first couple of episodes of season three," says McCulloch. "And he's written us the most lovely email patting us on the back and saying, basically, 'You've done a great job'.

"He made it clear early on that this is our version and while he'd check in on us and help us out, he wanted us to kind of own it. So for him to still be pleased about it is all we ever wanted, really.

"There isn't a desk here that doesn't have a copy of the book on it." ●

His Dark Materials is on BBC One and HBO Max from 5 December.



Ozymandias is Mrs Coulter's daemon. Boo, hiss!

FUTURE IMPERF

SHOWRUNNER
JEREMY CARVER
UNPACKS THE
STRANGE AND
WACKY FOURTH
SEASON OF DC'S
DOOM PATROL

WORDS: **BRYAN CAIRNS**

THE DOOM PATROL ARE NOT your typical superheroes. Each member gained special abilities after tragic accidents left them mentally and physically scarred. The current roster includes Crazy Jane, Cyborg, Elasti-Woman, Negative Man, Robotman and the newest member, reformed villain Madame Rouge. Shunned by society, these outcasts have stepped up to save the planet on multiple occasions. But in *Doom Patrol*'s upcoming fourth season, it will be the band of misfits themselves that need saving.

The premiere opens with the team unintentionally taking an outing to 2042 in Rouge's time machine. There they discover an apocalypse-ravaged Earth… and that most of the Doom Patrol have perished.

"The future that the Doom Patrol comes across is bleak, not just for humanity but specifically for themselves," showrunner Jeremy Carver tells *SFX*. "That sets off the central thematic premise of the season, which is basically, 'Are we going to go so far to save our Doom Patrol that we end up doing great damage to our personal selves?' And how much longer can they continue to do that to themselves? That leads to some soul-searching as the season progresses.

"The glaring difference they are seeing in the future is that they, too, did not survive," he adds. "That is the most glaring, bring-it-home take-away. They also realise some prior threats they thought were extinguished, namely the Butts, were not quite extinguished in a way that they thought and are once again rearing their ugly butts."

GROUP EFFORT

As if that bombshell wasn't enough to shoulder, the Doom Patrol find themselves dealing with a Knights Templar prophecy that's finally come to pass. It involves the rise of an otherworldly being known as the Time Lord. The Doom Patrol quickly realise their own happiness and wellbeing ties directly into this looming threat, causing them to embark on some mind-bending trips.

"In the past seasons, we have spent a good deal of time going backwards and seeing how our Doom Patrol got here," Carver says. "In this season, one thing we do a little bit different is for the most part, because we introduced this idea of not just a time machine but a timestream, we are going to see – in really fun and poignant ways – the Doom Patrol travel to different points of time."

Along the way, the quirky heroes must still contend with personal issues that plague them, especially after their jaunt to the future. In Negative Man's case, that means increasing

→

The Doom Patrol go on a... what's the word again?

“We really start to peel back where our Butts came from”

his efforts to be the best dad possible to Keeg, the energy spirit dwelling within him. Crazy Jane’s prime persona, Kay, begins to assert more control over the personality currently in charge, Dr H. And for Cyborg, he’s coming to terms with meeting his future self, a broken man full of regrets.

“It makes present-day Cyborg, Vic, double down on this central question of, ‘How do I move forward with my life, and what I want to do with my life, but how do I do it with my wants and my ideals?’” Carver says.

“That was a thought process that he was never really given when his father put him together this way. Seeing the future him makes Cyborg think very hard about everything. We have always said about our iteration of Cyborg that we were looking to fill in that gap of Cyborg going from young man to fully adult, and where he wanted to go with his life and the kind of man he wants to be.”

Meanwhile, Madame Rouge has officially joined the ragtag group of freaks to “save the fucking world,” as she puts it. But Rouge finds herself called upon in unforeseen ways by the gang. Rita isn’t cutting it as team leader, so they begin to lean on Rouge more.

“It’s a double-edged sword for Rouge,” notes Carver. “It’s not that they want her to just lead. They want her to do what she does best, which is a little bit of evil when she leads. What the team really see in her is a certain ruthlessness that none of them possess. It’s very confusing for Rouge because it is flattering, but also makes her not feel great about herself,” he adds. “Her eternal struggle has been this question of, ‘Am I good or am I bad?’ In doing all of this, Rouge actually finds herself more attached to this found family than we have seen before.”

Madeline Zima as Casey Brinke, aka Space Case.

This year will also add Casey “Space Case” Brinke, a beloved character from a recent run of the *Doom Patrol* comic books, to the mix. In a fourth-wall-breaking move, the narrative will introduce Casey as a superhero fighting the good fight in a comic book. But young Dorothy Spinner’s metahuman powers rip Casey from the pages and bring her to life.

“Casey represents a character whose life, until now, was entirely fictional but didn’t feel fictional to her,” Carver explains. “She has to come to grips with having been created on a page and now having to exist in the real world. We make all kinds of comparisons with our characters over what is real and what it means to feel real.

“She is delightful but can also be delightfully grating to some of our characters, who see her as a bit naïve. What we are going to see is as her attachment to humanity grows, so will her attachment to members of the Doom Patrol.”

The TV series embraces the weird and wacky, and that zaniness spills over into the Doom Patrol’s adversaries. On tap this year are Casey’s warped father Torminox, aka Mr 104, whose body is an amalgamation of all the elements on the periodic table, and Cod Piece with his “molten man batter”. The pièce de résistance, however, must be the triumphant return of the Butts. The fourth season’s teaser trailer showcases an underground compound that has created a creature that “could be bred as a weaponised force of nature”. Cue the Butts singing and, ahem, shaking their booties to the tune of ’50s musical number “Shipoopi”. As usual, the Doom Patrol are going to have to kick some ass.

April Bowlby as Rita Farr, aka Elasti-Woman.

Rita sums up the future for Doom Patrol. Depressing.

"When we introduced the Butts, they were fun and a little gross," Carver says. "We decided to revisit the Butts. We actually challenged ourselves to do the VH1 *Behind The Music* version of our Butts this season. We really show the inner humanity in our Butts. We really start to peel back where our Butts came from, how they are existing in this world, what their relationships are to one another and what their hopes and dreams are. We spent quite a bit of time personalising."

Showrunners frequently profess they have a three-, four- or five-year plan mapped out for their series. That's often designed to prevent a show from overstaying its welcome and instead allows them to go out on their own terms. Carver, however, doesn't sound like he's prepared to put the Doom Patrol to rest.

"As long as you have a fresh and inventive story to tell with your writers, and the actors are still into it, you have the ability to generate high-quality stories," he says. "We start to see that with this season as the Doom Patrol, thematically, are being asked to ask themselves, 'Okay, we see we are going to die. We need to save ourselves... But at what cost?'

"In answering that question, we start to see where potentially this particular chapter could end, to be reopened when and if necessary, in new and greater adventures," he concludes. ●

Doom Patrol is on HBO Max from 8 December. UK details are TBC.

RUBBERBAND GIRL

April Bowlby gets serious about leading the Doom Patrol

How pleased were you that Rita finally receives a superhero costume and codename in the premiere?
It was very exciting, because throughout the whole three seasons I've been really wanting Rita to finally have her fabulous outfit, as she is an actress and we need it to perform. It is actually perfect that Rita has stepped into the role of team leader. Now she is taking it to the full, artistic actress-y level of what's most important, which is a fabulous costume and codename.

The season three finale proved to be an awakening for the Doom Patrol. How do you feel Rita has blossomed since then?
In season four, she is taking her role more seriously as a team leader. You will see that she takes it so seriously, she ends up driving the Doomies away from her. She gets replaced by Madame Rouge. She becomes so hurt, and she takes it so seriously, she withers and becomes old Rita again. She's withdrawn, mopey, saggy and cranky. She holds it against the Doom Patrol. Then there's a shift that happens mid-season and the family needs her again.

Our heroes travel through the time stream this year. Besides 2042, which period did you enjoy visiting?
There's so much time travelling and there's also alternate universes. There is a fabulous alternate universe that we think is maybe in the '80s. It's this musical episode that we do. It is completely magical. We are all under this weird spell. It's unlike any musical episode that you've ever seen. It's so cinematic. Not to mention, we have some real singers on our show. Then you have Michelle Gomez and myself, who are not singers at all, so you get this nice comedy coming through the songs.

Rita has experienced so much growth. By the end of this season, how comfortable is she in her own skin?
Out of all the Doomies, Rita really becomes the most at peace with herself at the end of this season. She has gone full circle. One of the themes this season is immortality. The Doomies are trying to get their immortality back. There is a process that Rita goes through of acceptance of herself, because she starts to age. Rita starts to feel her age, which is around 167. She becomes what you would hope someone who has lived a complete life would be, which is very understanding and wise and just wants everyone to become a family and support each other. She becomes solid in herself and happy, and not that insecure, vulnerable actress that she was at the beginning, but as a person who came into her own as a leader and as a woman. That is one of the special journeys of Rita this year.

ELF QUEST

SHOWRUNNER DECLAN DE BARRA CHRONICLES THE COMING OF THE FIRST IN **THE WITCHER: BLOOD ORIGIN**

WORDS: **BRYAN CAIRNS**

SOME STORIES SIMPLY NEED TO BE TOLD. Declan de Barra, writer/producer of *The Witcher*, believed a vital piece of the show's lore had yet to be explored: the Conjunction of the Spheres. Many of the events leading up to the Conjunction – an ancient period when the worlds of man, monster and elf merged into one – still remained shrouded in secrecy.

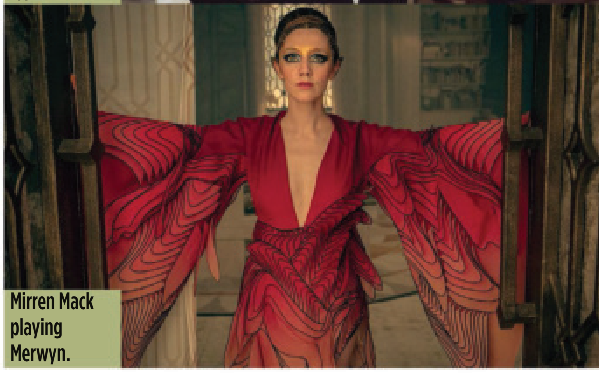
Even the original *Witcher* novels by Andrzej Sapkowski never fleshed out that period. And in planning the second season of *The Witcher*, the lack of detail over how the Conjunction transpired, and the mechanics behind it became frustrating. That aggravation fuelled the birth of *The Witcher: Blood Origin*.

"We were trying to figure things out," de Barra tells *SFX*. "I remember getting up to the whiteboard in the writers' room and I drew out a sketch of what I thought this world looked like and what the Conjunction of the Spheres is based on. At the end of season two, showrunner Lauren Schmidt Hissrich said, 'Would you be interested in writing a prequel, based on the Conjunction of the Spheres?' I was like, 'Yeah, that's great'. That thing was still in my head. I think it was in Lauren's head, as well.

"Three weeks go by and I'm sitting in a café going, 'Oh yeah, this pitch,'" he continues. "Literally, it all came out... A, B, C, D, E, F, G... straight down the line. The world. The characters. The names of the characters. What each one did. Why they didn't like each other. Why they had to work together. It all just came out and I was frantically scratching it all down on napkins.

"This never happens in the world of writing. It's banging your head against a brick wall for three months, throwing stuff out and tearing your hair out. I think it's a summation of everything I had read and seen coming up to that point as a fantasy fan and a genre fan, and knowing the world of the Witcher so well. It just leapt out."

Lenny Henry plays against type as Balor.


Mirren Mack playing Merwyn.

In 2020, Netflix announced it was developing a six-episode *Witcher* spin-off. But in genre tales like this, pacing is everything; "You can't hang around too long," De Barra notes. And so *Blood Origin* was whittled down to a shorter, brisker four-episode season.

"The beauty of this being a limited series is there are no rules," says de Barra. "We didn't have to follow a path. Netflix were great like that. It was treated like two movies, and like any movie, we don't want you to be sitting there and looking at your watch after enjoying it for so long, going, 'Come on guys. Start to →

The gang's all here... but they don't look happy.

HEART OF A WARRIOR

Laurence O'Fuarain has an axe to grind as the guilt-ridden Fjall

Audiences meet Fjall at a turning point in his life. We gather he is torn between heart and duty?
That was the conflict. Any sort of relationship or connection to anybody else, other than your clan, is frowned upon because it's seen as weakness. It's seen as you are not able to do your job properly. But love is love, and the heart wants what the heart wants. There's nothing more powerful than that. He fell into the trap. He hates himself for it, because it was a betrayal of his clan and his father. He has that guilt, and he has the guilt from a past experience where a loved one fell in battle. He blames himself and can't get over that. It's another notch in his belt of hate, depression and self-loathing.

What was the process of evolving the look of the character?
We had a make-up test to see what Fjall would look like. This was when I had to wear all the different costumes to make sure the colours were right and the ears fit. When I started the job, I had long hair. I wasn't as built. I flew over to Iceland, was there for three months, and I got in the best shape I could. They shaved my head. They gave me all my tattoos, my back tattoo to my arm tattoo. The scar. The ears. The hair. It was a bit of a surreal moment, where I looked in the mirror and went, "Wow. There it is."

Did that elaborate back tattoo need to be applied every day or only for shirtless scenes?
Every single day. Putting it on was okay, but after a hard 13-hour day, they had to scrub it off me. It was my own fault, because I asked for the tattoos. I came up with the story in relationship to his loved one that fell in battle. It just made sense. Declan came back to me with this design and I said, "I love it." But every time we had to put it on, we had to take it off because I couldn't sleep with it on. That was a killer. I was red raw for about six months!

His signature weapon is an axe – what more can you tell us about that?
His clan would have been trained to use an axe, because that is their weapon of choice. One of his clan axes would have been an average size, whereas this one that he comes across, it's a battle axe. When you're in a scene, obviously they give you a fake one so that when you are going through the motions, you don't take someone's head off. The real one weighed a ton. I kept it over my shoulder, but I kept hitting myself in the head with it all the time! I have a couple of scars from getting that axe in the forehead. But even just holding the axe allowed you to really tap into who Fjall was and what he was all about.

BLADE RUNNER

Sophia Brown sings the praises of representation in fantasy

Elves are often portrayed as cold and calculating. What did you want to bring to Éile?
I just didn't see these people as how elves have been depicted before. They were the opposite. They were the birth of this great nation, this continent. They are the origin. They are the beginning. It felt really pure. I wanted to bring a lot of love and heart. Éile feels so strongly, and I didn't want to hold back on that. I wanted her to be overflowing with emotion sometimes.

How was it wielding Éile's weapons of choice, those blades?
When they showed me the blades, I loved them. In my head, I just thought she was going to have a sword. But to have these tiny blades, and to be able to use them so intricately, was great. The things that I learned to do with them were indicative of the character. Also towards the end, I could make suggestions of the things that I wanted to do. It became slightly collaborative towards the end, but I take no credit.

Éile has been described as having the voice of a goddess. How intimidating was it to be singing on the show?
There was a lot of similarity between the style and feel of voice that Declan wanted for the character and that I wanted. There was a little bit of synergy there. It felt quite calming, to be honest. I didn't feel nervous about doing it. I am by no means Whitney Houston or Cynthia Erivo, but I really give my take on Éile's voice. I loved exploring her vocally, as well as the different characteristics that she had.

What fight sequence stands out in your mind?
The assassin's fight, which happens in the first episode, was so epic for me. It was like a moment where I'd seen something like this on-screen when I was younger, just those epic warrior battles. This time it was a woman, a black elf, in this fantasy world. I was like, "This is epic." [I was] working with all the stunt team – I think on that day there was 12 or 13 of them – and we had built this relationship by that point. It felt so fun, and they helped me in every way that I needed. You're doing a big fight sequence over two days in Iceland. What more could you want?

How important was it for you to see a black character in a fantasy setting?
I feel honoured to be playing Éile and to be a part of this *Witcher* universe. To be able to be a face in fantasy that I have not necessarily seen too much, if at all… I feel proud. I feel excited that my nieces and nephews can see it and watch it, and that will be normal for them growing up. That's exciting. It's been fulfilling emotionally, personally and spiritually to be representation for, I hope, many more people.

Fjall loves a bit of solitary brooding.

Éile performs her latest number.

wrap up.' It was just about timing. You rewrite the script a million times before you even shoot a frame. And you shoot as much as you can before you get into the edit room. Then the edit room is like the second time you get to rewrite everything."

Set more than a thousand years before the adventures of Geralt of Rivia, Ciri and Yennefer in the mothership series, *Blood Origin* unfolds in the Golden Age of Elves. This supernatural species has occupied the continent for a long time, but they weren't the original settlers. That honour belongs to gnomes and dwarves. As the elves established themselves and reached new heights in terms of science and magic, all the races blended together. De Barra compares the landscape to "Rome, or any great empire, before they fall."

"But like any great civilisation, we tend to mythologise them," de Barra says. "Of course, if you lived in them, they were quite horrible, as well. They did shitty things to get on top of the pile and create these cultures.

"In the elves' case, it was driving the dwarves out of the continent and treating them as second-class citizens. It's ironic because that is what happened to the elves when the humans came. I'm sure dwarves' history got buried by elven conquest. The theme running through this is stories are written by the victors. You might not know the whole story since stories get lost with the fall of cultures."

Blood Origin centres on three outcasts: Éile of the Raven Clan (Sophia Brown), Scian of the Ghost Clan (Michelle Yeoh), and Fjall of the Dog Clan (Laurence O'Fuarain). A protector of the royals, Éile (also known as the Lark) was trained to be a warrior in the Queen's guard.

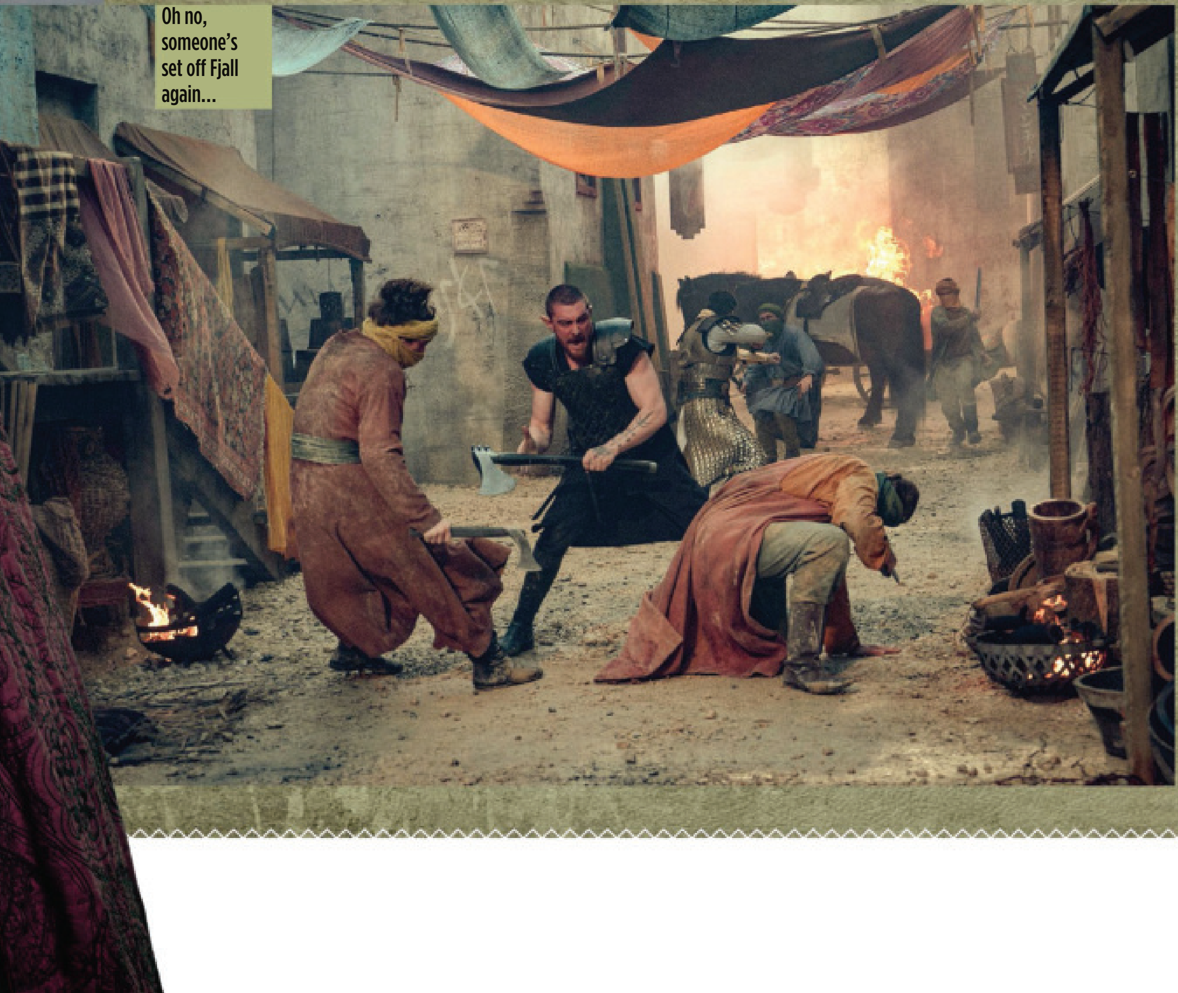
However, once she picked up a musical instrument, she left behind her life as a brutal enforcer. To atone for her past transgressions, Éile becomes a travelling musician, most notably performing for the Lowborn class.

As for the fierce Fjall, after disobeying orders, he was banished from his clan and cut off from family. The muscle of the group, he continually struggles to find his place in the world. When these two strong personalities eventually meet and clash under strained circumstances, it isn't pretty.

"There is an event that happens in the pilot that draws these two together, and they need to seek out revenge," de Barra explains. "They need to team up, even though they're on completely opposite sides. They are sworn enemies by birth, by blood. And they need help because they are outnumbered. And the only person they can think of for help is Éile's sword mother, Scian.

"Scian herself has no love for Éile because after Élie left, Scian was disgraced and was banished," he continues. "She's living out in the wasteland. There are these three outsiders, all banished from the lives they knew, and they all have to work together. They all essentially don't trust each other or like each other."

One intense stand-out sequence echoes *Game Of Thrones*' infamous Red Wedding. That massacre featured characters being shockingly slaughtered left and right. In *Blood Origin*, a gathering once again provides the perfect opportunity to kill off political rivals. In this case, however, no blades were required... →


Oh no, someone's set off Fjall again...

Chief Druid Balor has an impressive stick.

"What is this fearsome machine?"

Merwyn goes undercover – but why?

only a fire-breathing dragon. "I had to set up this world and have an upheaval," de Barra reflects. "This was essentially turning the world upside down, a world that had been there for a thousand years.

"How can I encapsulate turning three kingdoms at war upside down, turn the status quo upside down, in one minute? It took ages to come up with this. You would think it would be fairly obvious, but it was one of the last things that went in. But I was happy with how it turned out."

> " You get to see your tiny sketch turn into a 3D rendering and become believable "

A flying reptile isn't the only fantastical creature inhabiting the realm. De Barra promises that "all the monsters in the *Witcher* books are mentioned." In addition, the writers' room tapped into various folklores for inspiration to invent their own nightmares.

A fan of *Jason And The Argonauts*, de Barra professes that the whole creative process "made the 13-year-old me lose my brain. I grew up in Ireland with lots of stories of monsters in mythology," he explains. "Then there's the European and Japanese stuff. In nearly every culture's lore are monsters. It was the best fun ever designing these. I remember there was one we couldn't do, or we had to change at the last minute, so I had to come up with something new. I was literally sketching it out in the car on the way home. Then you get to see your tiny sketch turn into a 3D rendering and become believable and interact with people... It's amazing."

Blood Origin is about more than the the Elven empire. The stakes are much higher. The show not only dives into Witcher lore and its brotherhood, but chronicles the origin of the very first Witcher. Who that individual is constitutes a massive spoiler.

The miniseries also fills in the gap regarding the creation of the monoliths, those mysterious marked obelisks currently causing problems for Geralt and company. In other words, pay attention; everything that occurs in *Blood Origin* will directly impact the *Witcher* series.

"I was always looking back towards the books and the world, so that anything I set in motion here would pay off in the world of *Witcher*," de Barra says. "I couldn't just go off and write anything I wanted. It's not logical for the canon that is coming up. Yes, I had a huge sandbox, but I wanted it to pay off and pay forward, to be nice foundation in reverse for the wonderful world of the Witcher.

"Lauren was working on season three, but we spent a lot of time going back and forth," he concludes. "'What about this? What about that? Oh, that thing that you have on page five, can we use that there?' I was like, 'Yeah.' There's lots of Easter eggs, lots of paying stuff off and mythology that pays off in seasons three, four, five and beyond..." ●

The Witcher: Blood Origin is on Netflix from 25 December.

Francesca Mills (*Worzel Gummidge*) plays Meldot.

"Wait till you see the whites of their eyes, everyone!"

SWORD MOTHER

Michelle Yeoh is not your average mercenary for hire

Who is Scian and what is her background?
I am the last of a nomadic tribe called the Ghost Clan. We are very skilled in swordsmanship, but we don't fight for anyone, unlike the other clans. We are not swords for hire. The old King of Xintrea decided our clan was insulting [him] because we would not fight for his kingdom, so he sent the Dog Clan to poison my entire tribe. I was saved by the Raven Clan, who adopted me, and I became the sword mother of Éile, who is the Lark, and that was our bond.

Unfortunately for the Queen of Pryshia, I taught Éile more than swordsmanship. I instilled in her the idea of love and creativity, and that began her relationship with music. When Éile decided to leave her life as a warrior to become a bard, the Queen blamed my influence and banished me. I became the thing my clan would have been most ashamed of: a sellsword. I was fighting and surviving by selling my swordsmanship.

Scian has very distinctive tattoos on her face. Do they have meaning?
All the tattoos have special meanings. For example, the one on my forehead says "Promises made shall not waiver." The one on the side of my face says "Born of black sands, cast by fire, shaped by the sea." We live by the sword but we also live by promise and integrity.

What does Scian think of these two ex-warrior clan travelling companions?
Fjall is quite adorable, but Scian would never say so. He is impetuous and emotional. He gets very angry before he understands why, and does things without thinking first. Scian believes if he learned not to be so temperamental, he could be a very good warrior.

Éile has been shunning her part as a warrior and does not want to pick up a sword but, just prior to coming to Scian, she saw her sister killed in front of her eyes and it galvanises Éile to realise she has to go on this journey. If not to protect the people, then to take revenge for her own clan, she had to do something and not run away again.

What stunt work was involved for your character? Did you have a favourite sequence you can describe?
We had a great fight in the bank, when we are trying to get money to pay a team of sellswords to back us up in Xintrea. It was our first solid fight, and I loved the way it was choreographed because it showed how they had to work as a team to protect each other. [Stunt coordinator] Adam Horton and his team worked very closely with the DOP and the camera team, so the camera moves with the action and there is real energy and dynamics.

What do you think audiences will get from this?
This will be a really exciting ride because it is so magical and it's an epic journey about love. It's not just a quest for getting back a blade or finding peace, it is a journey within, a journey with each other.

WATE
PRES

INSPIRED BY SOME GENRE GREATS, **THE RIG** BRINGS OFFSHORE TERROR TO TV

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

R SURE

WORSE THINGS happen at sea, we're reliably informed. That's cold comfort if you find yourself trapped on a fog-bound oil rig, at the mercy of inexplicable forces, high above the icy waters off the Scottish coast.

"I always think of them as castles in the sea," says David Macpherson, writer of *The Rig*, a new drama that collides the uncanny with the grit and grease of the North Sea oil industry. "They're almost like a fortress, a haunted house – that feeling of isolation when you're onboard and there's literally nothing around and you have crashing waves and you're chest-forward to whatever the elements throw at you.

"It's a great place to set a drama, because you've got so much conflict already bubbling around the workplace. It's a microcosm of society. Like in *Alien* or *The Thing*, you put the crazy on top and it amplifies everything. I think it's a fascinating world in itself, and then my genre heart comes out as we progress and things just get bigger and bigger and bigger as it goes on. It's a thrill ride."

BIG RIGS

For Macpherson, who grew up near the Cromarty Firth in Scotland, this tale of blue-collar gothic is rooted as much in real-world experience as in his declared love of Ridley Scott and John Carpenter.

"In my imagination [the rigs] have always been there," he tells *SFX*. "They literally tower over the village where I grew up. And my dad worked on oil rigs all his life, really. He used to build them in a shipyard in the north of Scotland, in Nigg, then when I got a bit older he started going offshore. He would always bring us back stories of this strange place, just the weird environment that these oil rigs are. They always fascinated me.

"There's a sense that there's often no way out. When my dad was working offshore it was a regular occurrence that he would be due to come home one day and then we'd get a phone call saying no, there's a fog, or there's a storm. And sometimes you don't get a phone call, maybe the communications are interrupted, or work is so busy that they don't have time, so sometimes you're just left waiting. I worked to inject a sense of that uncertainty and fear. That's why we start with them thinking they're going to get out, but they're not."

The six-part series is set on Kinloch Bravo, a beast of a platform looming above the freezing depths. As crewmen prepare to return to the mainland on routine leave, the rig is paralysed by mysterious power failures, cutting communications and reducing the TV to static. Soon Kinloch Bravo is engulfed by fog, rolling in across the waves, and effectively exiled from the outside world. And then the tremors hit...

It's tempting to see all this as channelling pure childhood separation anxiety, suggests *SFX*. "Perhaps it is," smiles Macpherson. "I think I reflect on it much more now. Because I grew up with it, it was just normal. There were a lot of families where dads worked offshore.

"But now that I've been onboard and seen a rig, it does amaze me, both from my dad's point of view but also my mum's. What would she have thought when she didn't get a phone call to say whether or not he's coming home? She's got three kids to look after. It must have been a much more frightening, stressful time than they ever let on to us.

"But rather than psychoanalysing myself, I wanted to recognise the sheer achievement that the oil industry represents, for all that it's in a challenging place right now. I used to work in climate change. You'd think me and my dad would be at opposite ends, but actually we're much closer.

"I wanted to open up questions on those areas without necessarily saying, 'This is my view, this is what people should think'. It's about exploring that territory, because it's so difficult nowadays in traditional media to have conversations around that, whereas I hope in drama we can get into the nuance and show the dignity and the hard work of the people involved, and all that they have achieved, but also the challenges that face us in the future, where we should be going as a nation, and as a species."

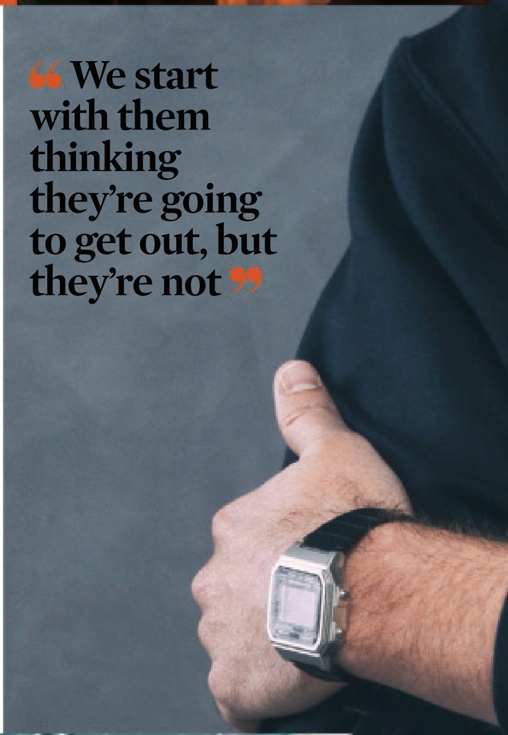
There's a clear ecological pulse driving *The Rig*. As one character says, "If we keep punching holes in the Earth, eventually it's going to punch back."

"I hope that we're not preachy," says Macpherson. "It certainly grows in prominence over the series. I think it works in tandem with the action. We didn't want those things to work against each other, so everything builds together. We kind of push those two carts along at the same time."

Lockdown denied the production the chance to film on a real, working rig – Macpherson remembers location scouting in Orkney, bobbing in a little boat beneath a giant steel leg at sunrise, awed at "the immense scale" –

Mark Bonnar (*Humans*) plays Alwyn Evans.

Iain Glen and Martin Compston: don't panic!



> "We start with them thinking they're going to get out, but they're not"

Magnus MacMillan falls for the Super Glue trick.

which meant Kinloch Bravo, in all its industrial sprawl, needed to be constructed in the studio.

"Our set is gigantic. I'm very proud of the job that our designer Rob Harris and our VFX team have done in creating this world. The design is amazing. It was my first time on a big set like that and I couldn't believe it. Not even just the big stuff – we've got a helideck and a control room – but they even paint on the rust... and we've got a lot of rust! We did some stuff outside as well, there's some water work, but the combination of those sets and the visual effects is just fantastic."

SINK OR SWIM

Crewing the rig – and battling the mind-breaking events – is an equally impressive cast, including *Line Of Duty*'s Martin Compston as communications operator Fulmer Hamilton, along with Celtic acting stalwarts Iain Glen, Owen Teale and Mark Bonnar.

"I feel very, very lucky with the cast," Macpherson tells *SFX*, "just how invested they were in the project. I was constantly having discussions with them, and they wanted to learn as much as possible about their characters and this world. We set them all up with real people equivalents, who do their job in the real world, and that was very rewarding.

"Emily [Hampshire], for instance, became a geology geek. I gave her all the books that I'd used and she still wanted more! Martin has his own connection to the oil industry with his dad, and he was very happy to bring elements of that in. Iain as well was able to draw on experiences that he'd had in the past, personally, so he used that to enhance his character. It's one of the things I found most rewarding about working with that cast."

The Rig marks Macpherson's debut as a TV writer (his comic fantasy novel *Here Be Dragons* was published in 2018). "It was a very big learning curve," he admits. "Before this I had been on sets twice, once as an extra – I think I actually got cut in the end – and once on a short film made in Ullapool, where my job was to stop traffic as they filmed. We were in an incredibly rural part of the world so there wasn't much traffic to stop... So going from that to a studio where the Avengers had just been was pretty awe-inspiring.

"It was sink or swim, and I swam, so I'm proud of myself. A lot of the advice for new writers is to do something small, easy to make, but I grew up watching James Cameron films, and John Carpenter and Ridley Scott, that kind of big action sci-fi. I thought, 'That's what I love to watch, so that's what I want to try and make.'" At the other end of our Zoom call Macpherson points to the United Federation of Planets symbol on his chest.

"There are always influences – I've got my *Star Trek* T-shirt on today!"

The Rig is on Prime Video from 6 January.

"HE'S CAUGHT IN THE CROSSFIRE"

Martin Compston is Rigged and ready

The show is gripping from the get-go. Did you get that feeling from the scripts?
Yeah, it was pretty wild. I assumed it was going to be about big rough men, hard drinking, hard working, kitchen sink drama, so nobody was more surprised than me by the turn it takes. As you were reading it you were just so intrigued to see where this thing went, because it just got more and more wild as the episodes went on. Even when I watched it, it's still very hard to put it in a box, which is quite exciting, to be on something that original.

So how does Fulmer react when things get weird?
Within the crew he ends up in a pretty unique position. He's caught in the crossfire of everything and probably gets to delve a bit deeper into the situation than most. So he has to react differently, and he doesn't really have an option. And he's in a very, very scary situation as it goes on.

It's a classic siege situation!
Yeah, you're not going anywhere! At first we're cut off, and it's terrifying, but at the same time we don't know what else is out there, so we don't know if we'd rather be on the rig or off it...

And what do you make of the show's ecological angle?
It's very pertinent, and these are questions we should all be posing ourselves at the minute. If it's something that can add to that conversation, and keep that conversation going, then that can only be a good thing.

GHOST WATCH

MARK GATISS HAS FESTIVE NIGHTMARES IN STORE WITH HIS NEW

GHOST STORY FOR CHRISTMAS

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**

A GLOOMY RAINY DAY ON the country outskirts of Beaconsfield, an English town that's positively Dickensian. As we walk through the mist, pheasants cross our path and a large country manor looms in the distance. It can only be Mark Gatiss's *A Ghost Story For Christmas*.

It's late October and *SFX* is the only publication granted access to filming of *Count Magnus*, the latest MR James story to receive the BBC *Ghost Story* treatment. The perfect setting to recreate Sweden in 1863, Hall Barn Estate has previously been a filming location for *The Crown*, *Gosford Park*, *Downton Abbey* and *Chariots Of Fire*'s famous scene of Lord Lindsay leaping over hurdles holding glasses of champagne.

This five-day shoot has the property bustling with all the trappings of a period drama, as crew move the modern furniture across floorboards to send viewers back in time.

"It's probably the biggest I've managed since *Tractate Middoth*," considers Gatiss. "Jon Dear is writing a book about *Christmas Ghost Stories* and he's tracked down all the original paperwork from *Whistle And I'll Come To You* [1968], and Jonathan Miller had a team of six! But that's because it was a documentary crew. It was just done in a totally different way. But it is extraordinary how many people you recruit in your circus," he laughs.

We squeeze past some of these recruits and into the back as a scene is filmed in a dusty library – it already feels exactly like a traditional *Ghost Story* as smoke is being pumped into the room. There are cobwebs everywhere, with candles, globes and piles of books. Just out of shot there's an anachronistic modern flatscreen television.

During a break in filming, one of the crew poses by a window. "Did you like my Nosferatu?" he asks. "Don't think it went unnoticed," Gatiss replies. Jason Watkins stars as Mr Wraxall, who's researching the history of Count Magnus. In this scene he's up a ladder, where he drops a book and finds a scroll. "Ah, talk of the devil." It's one that has an Easter egg for fans.

"It's so strange this," Gatiss recalls, "because we've been out of [our] house for five months for builders, and I cannot find anything. I can't find shoes and all sorts, but weirdly, when I was about to leave to go and film *Count Magnus* I just went up in the loft, and the first thing I saw was the Tractate Middoth staring at me. So I thought, 'I'm gonna put that in...'" →

PORTRAITS BY BERNIE WATSON

This particular adaptation is special to Gatiss, as he explains. "It's the one I've always wanted to do. It's a great story. Also, I knew it was the one that eluded Lawrence Gordon Clark – the reason *The Signalman* [1976] was made was because they couldn't afford to do "Count Magnus". So it's always sort of been in the back of my mind.

"Originally we talked about doing E Nesbit's "Man-Size In Marble", which is the first ghost story I ever read, and I've always loved. I thought it might be quite nice to change it up a bit and adapt someone else. But then for various practical reasons, it wasn't possible.

"I thought, 'Count Magnus… we'd have to go to Sweden.' And then I suddenly thought, my job is to make it *look* like Sweden and not have to get to Sweden. So as soon as I thought it's feasible, the actual mechanics of the story are quite straightforward. It's a small cast and for a low-budget production, which is crucial, really, I thought we can actually make it look quite lavish without it being too enormous."

CHRISTMAS TRADITION

As ever, Gatiss says he always has plans for more entries in the strand that's been running on and off as a Christmas television tradition since 1971.

"I'd love to if it's possible. The thing is, it's an annual battle because unfortunately the half-hour slot doesn't really exist any more, except here [in the UK]. So it's all about trying to find the funds to sell it as a package. It's amazing how many people say, 'Oh, it wouldn't be Christmas without a Mark Gatiss *Ghost Story*.' I love the fact it's become an instant tradition. It's one I'm very keen to keep going, but it's always difficult to find the money. That's the truth. I'd love to do more James, I'd love to do other authors, I'd love to do more originals."

Speaking of new stories, talk turns to his original plans for a 2020 instalment. "After *Martin's Close*, Cassian Harrison at BBC Four asked me to do another original one. So I wrote this script called *The Night Wedding*. But it's set in a hospital, it's mostly a cast of very old people dying, and we couldn't do one for 2020 obviously. Then it just didn't seem the right thing to do. So that's why we did *The Mezzotint*."

He says he's hopeful the script will see the light of day in future, though perhaps not in the festive schedules. "It sort of fits better being a strand of an anthology, perhaps, than a *Ghost Story For Christmas*. My feelings about the *Ghost Story* strand are very particular," he grins. "I love the idea of pushing it forward by doing new ones and also by taking it in unexpected ways, I suppose a bit like making the gay love story the centre of *The Dead Room*. It's sort of unexplored territory for it. So I like the idea of pushing it forward.

No digital clapperboards here, thanks.
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DIR M.GATISS
CAM S.HUTTUNEN
SCENE
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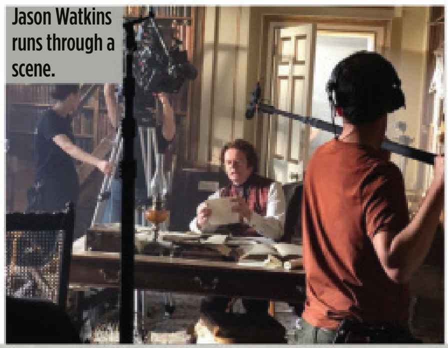
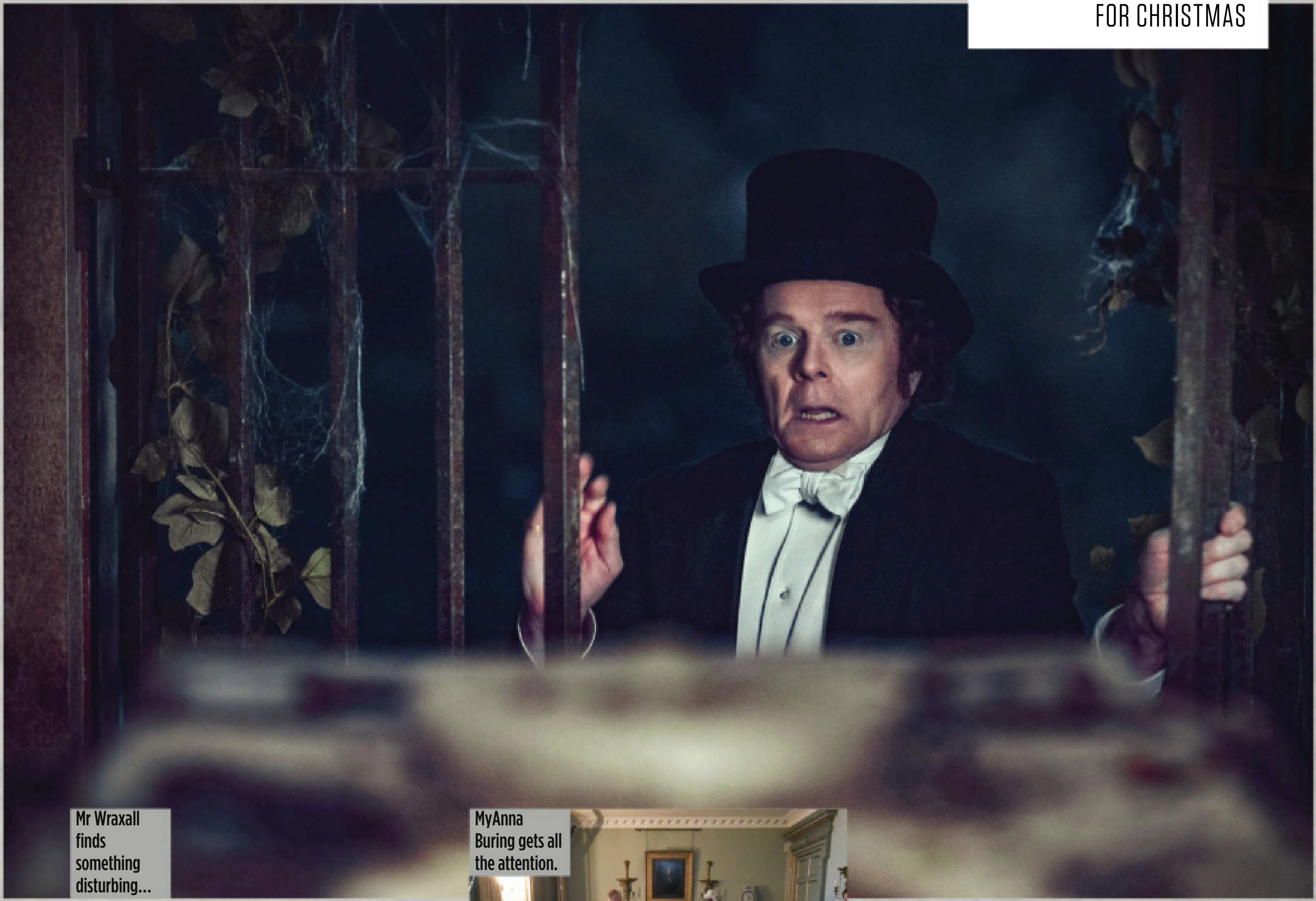

Jason Watkins runs through a scene.

"But similarly, there's something so appealing about what James would call the pleasing terror of the familiarity of an MR James story. This one, particularly, being set in 1863, it pushes all the right buttons, doesn't it? It's an interesting conundrum, wanting to push it forward as a form, but also to enjoy the Christmas trappings of its familiarity."

Could this be the genesis of his own horror series? "Well, maybe someone has to ask me!" BBC execs, please attend carefully.

Moving past crew cutting down candles to small wicks and melting them, we head to a dark dining room, heavy curtains closed, for another scene. There's a Swedish clock that production sourced from a local pub. Someone steps into shot and removes a bell from the long table. "That's from an earlier draft," Gatiss notes, sitting on the floor with a bound copy of his script.

MyAnna Buring, as Froken de la Gardie, sits at the other end of the table from Jason Watkins and the pair run lines while



Mr Wraxall finds something disturbing…

> “I love the fact it’s become an instant tradition. I’m very keen to keep it going”

pretending to eat soup from empty bowls. A producer makes an announcement about props before the camera rolls. “Real candles, real fire, real wax. Don’t touch anything, it’s all very expensive.”

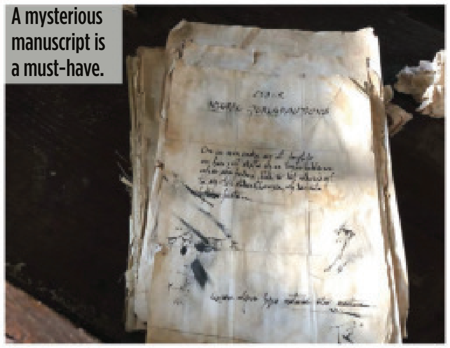
Gatiss says plans to shoot parts of *Count Magnus* in a London Swedish church were abandoned in order to keep locations within a small area.

“We were very lucky with Harrow School last year [for *The Mezzotint*] because everything was within a stone’s throw, even the golf course which was crucial to the story,” he recalls. “So once we found the location for this one, it was like, well, we need a mausoleum. We need a stately home, we need the lake and then an inn quite close by.

“But we couldn’t afford an adjunct by shooting in the Swedish church. So I just eliminated the church. So there’s a few things like that, but it’s very faithful to the story, generally.”

GETTY

MyAnna Buring gets all the attention.



A mysterious manuscript is a must-have.

The Tractate Middoth returns!

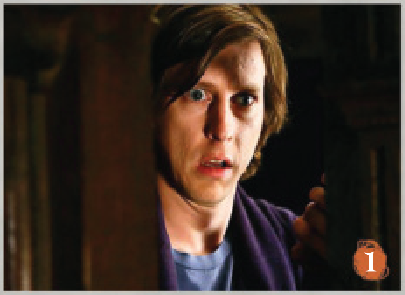
Speaking of being faithful, is he squirrelling away *Ghost Story* documentation for future historians to unearth?

“The thing is that the paper trail is different these days. It’s all emails and there’s very little actual documentation in that way to be found years later. But I suppose in a very MR James way it should sort of be semi-lost and then you should only find one page of it with a warning. It could be called ‘A Warning To The Budget’.”

HAUNTING TIMES

As is also becoming something of a tradition, these are not the only ghosts for Gatiss this December. His stage production of *A Christmas Carol* from London’s Alexandra Palace in 2021 comes to cinemas and then BBC Four in December. He’s also performing as Sherlock Holmes in a new production of *The Hound Of The Baskervilles*, which will be on Radio Three, as well as performing for one night live at London’s Barbican in December.

“Last year was an insane year. I had *The Mezzotint*, *The Amazing Mr Blunden* and *A Christmas Carol*, so that’s the ghostliest it’ll probably ever get. But it was a very nice place to be. Although it was Christmas all year, literally all year round for me. I couldn’t escape it!” he laughs. →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GHOSTS OF CHRISTMAS PAST

Mark Gatiss on reviving a classic

1 CROOKED HOUSE (2008)

Crooked House was on at Christmas. As I remember, they showed them as separate half-hours and then I think the omnibus one was actually on Christmas Eve 2008. Obviously that was my first attempt to sort of get in there. That would be included [as a *Ghost Story*], obviously along with *The Stone Tape* and Lawrence Gordon Clark's modern-day *Casting The Runes* and things like that. There's an awful lot of interesting stuff around there...

2 THE TRACTATE MIDDOTH (2013)

It came about because I was asked to do the documentary on MR James. It was a very busy year, 2013 – that was *An Adventure In Space And Time* and two *Doctor Who*s. I said I'd love to but I couldn't do it. They kept asking, and eventually I said yes, on the condition I could write and direct one of the stories. I chose *Tractate* because it was one of my favourites, but also, I thought it felt doable, but not too huge.

We shot it in Manchester, which is amazing now, to actually go on location like that. Again, it was through BBC Arts, and we managed to make the documentary as cheaply as possible in order to put as much into the drama. So that was an interesting thing. As a package that's still very attractive, I was talking about that the other day with BBC Arts: the idea of a documentary plus a drama means you've got 90 minutes of material, which is a very useful way of selling it.

It went down very well and I was very pleased and I wanted to do some more. I think I might have proposed doing an EF Benson documentary with a drama. But they didn't go for that.

3 THE DEAD ROOM (2018)

I basically badgered the BBC for the next three, four or five years. And then [channel editor] Cassian Harrison at BBC Four, I remember this distinctly, he said, "Can you do it for X?" I won't say how much. And I said, "Yes!" It wasn't very much money. I wrote *The Dead Room* around a very small budget and I had this idea about a radio studio.

I thought Maida Vale, which I've worked in a lot, always felt, to me, quite haunted. I thought doing a story about, as it were, MR James's rules of how to tell a ghost story is quite an interesting thing. Particularly that thing of his 30-year rule, that it should be something from the recent, not too distant past. I thought, if it's set in the present day, that ghosts would be from the '70s. Immediately, I thought, that's an interesting place, a sort of disco ghost, which is how it came about.

4 MARTIN'S CLOSE (2019)

I think I blackmailed Cassian into commissioning it at the BFI screening of *The Dead Room*! *Martin's Close* was a not-famous MR James that I'd always liked, I thought it was doable again, because it was quite contained. So we did that in summer 2019. And then *The Night Wedding* didn't happen...

5 THE MEZZOTINT (2021)

The Mezzotint was the sort of Covid response again, because I deliberately chose that not just because it's a very good famous story, but because it felt very doable. It's a very static story, it's about a picture. Therefore it's not about having 300 extras, or even 30, which we had in *Martin's Close* around a full jury. And we made that under Covid conditions, so I knew it had to be very spare.

Ghost Stories is available on DVD now. *Ghost Stories For Christmas: Volume One* is available on Blu-ray from 5 December.

Oh gawd, the lid's off. Run away!

Some lovely production design.

> "The more Christmas leaches into the rest of the year, the less special it becomes, I think"

Does he actually like Christmas? "I love Christmas. Well, I love Christmas Eve. That's my favourite day of the year, always. I could kind of take or leave Christmas Day. People go to hot places for Christmas and I could never do that. But I could sort of go basically Christmas afternoon. I'd be very happy. Once it's done, I'd rather leave the country.

"I love the build-up, it's fantastic. I particularly love Christmas Eve. There's something so *Christmas Carol*-y about the idea of when Scrooge and Marley shut up shop and it's just getting dark and that kind of three o'clockness.

"But it gets earlier every year and goes on too long now, I think," he says of the festive season. "It's a real phenomenon of people putting up their trees in September and not taking them down till Easter and stuff like that. I think there's a kind of madness about it. It's like people hanging on in a sort of arrested development way to everything that still makes them happy.

"I think it speaks of very unquiet times that people are hanging on to these things. Because the reason that Christmas is special is because it's special. The more it leaches into the rest of the year, the less special it becomes, I think. That's my TED talk." ●

A Ghost Story For Christmas: Count Magnus will be on BBC Two at Christmas. A Christmas Carol will be on BBC Four.

O'Brien is menaced by Koquillion for a press call.

SFX DOCTOR 60 WHO

SPACE GIRL

MAUREEN O'BRIEN BATTLED DALEKS, XERONS, AND THE MEDDLING MONK. NOW SHE HAS TO CONTEND WITH HIGH DEFINITION…

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

MAUREEN O'BRIEN HAD NO DESIRE to star in *Doctor Who*. She was already perfectly happy performing at Liverpool's Everyman Theatre, thank you very much.

"It didn't sound like much cop. I wasn't interested," she tells *SFX*. Indeed, she had little interest in television, full stop. "We didn't have a television in the house when I was a kid. It just meant nothing. The only thing that mattered to me was theatre. That was where my life was going to be. I didn't take television seriously at all."

Nevertheless, she was encouraged to apply for the role of Vicki by her teacher at the Central School of Speech and Drama. A reluctant audition for producer Verity Lambert followed, and she was offered the job.

O'Brien accepted for one reason: she'd be closer to her London-based partner, Michael. Unfortunately, a darker side to her newfound fame soon revealed itself.

"Suddenly I had journalists calling me, camped outside, banging on the window and shouting, talking to the neighbours – 'Have you ever seen her, what does she look like?'. Michael and I were crouched on the floor, curtains drawn, these monsters outside.

"It was *traumatic*. I have never known anything like it. I thought, 'What's happening, what have I done?'" She hadn't set a foot inside the studio. "It gave me a horror of publicity from that moment on. I didn't like being famous in that way."

Her first episode aired to 10.1 million viewers and the actress found herself facing unwanted attention and harassment. "I was just appalled by it. I went through a period when I could do nothing but cry, all the time. It was a breakdown. It was such a shock. We're all the same, and [fame] kind of removes you into this 'other'. It was frightening. I didn't like it." This was only the beginning of O'Brien's complicated, you might say, relationship with *Doctor Who*.

NEW FACES

Fortunately, happier times lay ahead, thanks in no small part to the relationships she developed with her new "family", including William Hartnell, who was a year into his tenure as the Doctor. "I was aware of nothing but welcome," she says of their first encounter, "but he probably reserved judgement until he could see whether I could do it or not. He was rather touched by how seriously I took the acting. He was just incredibly nice to me. He loved his fellow actors."

What was her co-star like on set? "He was difficult," she says, resolutely. "He was irascible. He was everything that's terrible." Hartnell was prone to a temper, she divulges, and could flare up several times a day. "Spitting, vicious teeth, with rage!" She gesticulates, vividly. "He would say terrible things about people." O'Brien took on the role of mediator, laughing →

TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY

O'Brien, Hartnell and Peter Purves.

him out of his rages. Despite this she remembers him as "a lovely man, and a wonderful actor. We were friends from the very beginning. He was very fond of me, and I was fond of him."

O'Brien recalls one particular hair-raising encounter with the series' creator, Sydney Newman. "He said to me, 'How would you like to cut your hair short and dye it dark?' I said, 'I'm going to change my hairstyle when I *leave* *Doctor Who*, not when I'm in it!' It was no secret that I wasn't happy. He said, 'I thought it would be more of a stronger image.' I said, 'If you want short, dark hair, why don't you just get Carole Ann Ford back?' He laughed, and that was it. I went on set."

In one of *Doctor Who*'s most audacious adventures, "The Web Planet", a colony of weird and wonderful insects menace the TARDIS, its crew, and Riverside Studios' cameras. O'Brien smiles upon recalling the story's ant-like aliens, the Zarbi.

"They were wonderful. When they reared up, there was no feeling that there was an actor inside them, they just seemed like the real thing. They were huge. I can remember one of them coming up to me when I was standing at the side of the set. He towered over me, and I was back up against the wall. They were threatening. I was really scared." Yet the story is still one of O'Brien's favourites. "It was a brilliant conception. It had a real philosophy, and it was ambitious. Very ambitious."

> **"I didn't know what I was letting myself in for, for the rest of my life! One little job in 1965"**

What does she recall of the robot Chumblies from "Galaxy 4"? "I loved the actors who were inside them," she beams. "They were played by little people. I felt we had a lot in common! They were talked to as though they were children. They were not only grown-up but middle-aged, even elderly, but they were being talked to as though they were children. I thought it was bizarre. How can they do this? But there it was..."

Of primary concern to O'Brien was Vicki's characterisation. The writers, she says, had no idea what girls of 15 were really like. "I was a Liverpool kid, and Liverpool kids are very bright and funny and sceptical, but I just wandered about saying, 'Oh Doctor, what is it? Oh Doctor, I'm so frightened!'

"I decided, because she seemed to be so dim, and," – she lowers her voice – "boring, that the only way I could get away with this 'Doctor! Doctor!' was to play her very young. I thought, she's unnaturally young and innocent for her age, and that's the way I played her. That's why I did this awfully innocent, little girl voice. That's the only way I thought I could make it work.

"Watching an episode recently," she adds, "I'm quite a bolshy, teenage rebel in it and I thought that was clever of me, to start creeping it in. I looked at it and thought, 'Good for you, girl. You've got some real life in there.' I wasn't content to play it on one level like that, as a simple girl."

After returning from a six-week summer break, O'Brien discovered she had been written out of the series. "My script was waiting, and I thought it was great, but normally you got two lots of scripts and I didn't have the next one. I said to Peter [Purves], 'What about the next script, have you got yours yet?' He said yes! It gradually dawned that this was my demise and my goodbye. It was a bit of a surprise. I was very relieved because if there's another script and another script, the temptation to keep going on is huge. It's money, it's a job, and you might be, as I was when I left, unemployed for a year. It wouldn't happen now of course, but then, before the era of the celebrity cult, you were just Vicki in *Doctor Who* and nobody could use you in anything else. Not in television anyway. So off I went! I was very pleased."

O'Brien, understandably, shied well away from the *Doctor Who* convention scene, only attending the occasional signing, years apart. But she has found herself dipping her toe into fandom's waters over the past year. "I don't mind any more," she says, adding that she's pleased her character is so fondly remembered. "I'm glad to make people happy."

Vicki's final story, "The Myth Makers".

When in Rome.. in "The Romans".

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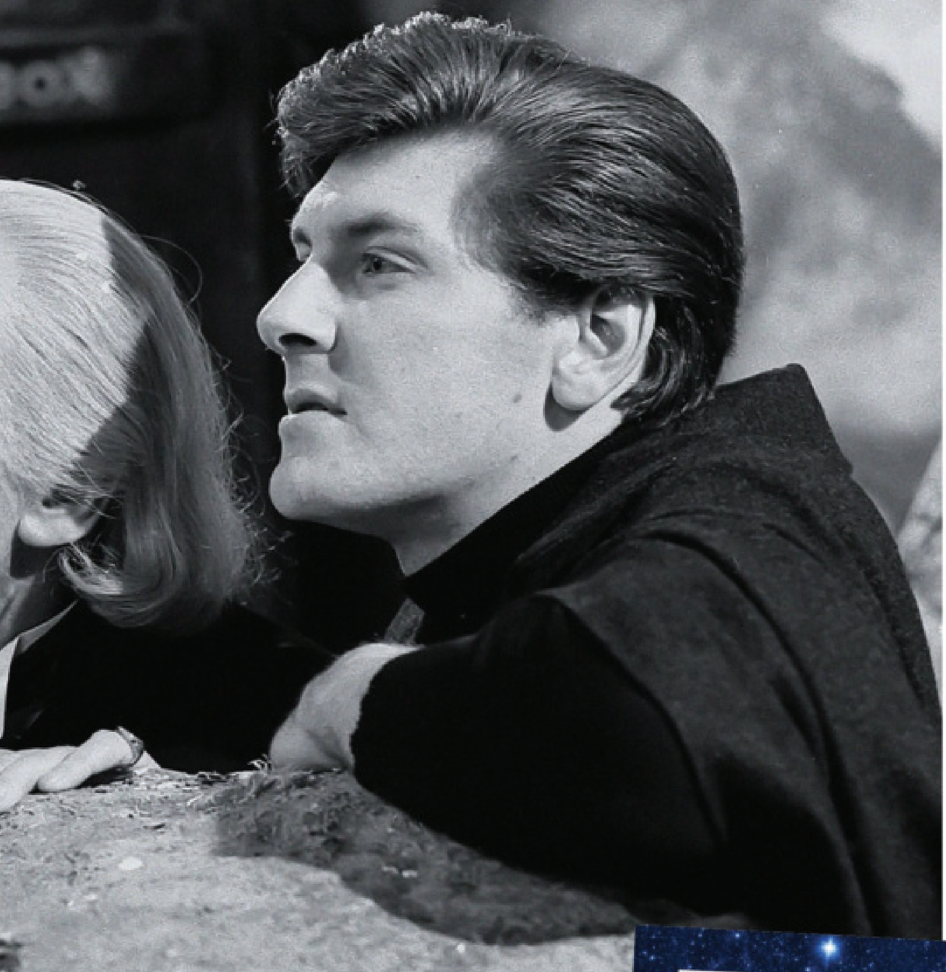


With William Russell and Jacqueline Hill.

There's Dalek danger and daring in "The Chase".

O'Brien next to the plaque for producer Verity Lambert.

Seven of Vicki's nine *Doctor Who* adventures are debuting in glorious HD this month as part of the season two Blu-ray collection. The format means little to O'Brien, who admits she "can't even play DVDs!" Regardless, she fully embraced the release by filming a special trailer for it.

"The Storyteller" marked the first time that O'Brien – who turned to writing crime novels after retiring from acting in 2003 – had portrayed Vicki in front of a camera for five decades. "It was so wonderful to actually be acting in vision again," she sighs. "To be *visible* again…"

In the trailer, Vicki (who left the TARDIS to stay in Troy circa 1200 BC) enthrals her granddaughter Sophia with thrilling tales of old friends and deadly foes. "The script was absolutely lovely. It's very short, but it's very good. It packs a lot in."

O'Brien was particularly enthused by her Grecian-style dress. "Marcia Stanton produced something so beautiful, so classic. I sent her my measurements and she turned up with the costume. She didn't have to take it in or take anything off, it was just perfect. It was so graceful. A perfect design."

Having had a brief taste of playing Vicki once again, would she be up for reprising the role on television? "Yes, I'd love that! If anyone ever offered it to me, of course I would! I used to say no a lot. I never say no now. I just want to work. It would be lovely."

O'Brien isn't overly familiar with her storylines, but she admits to being impressed by what she sees, when she thinks of the paucity of the means. "What was achieved with so little, with cardboard and glue and imagination," she says. "The imagination of the designer, the writer, and the audience."

She likens her *Doctor Who* episodes to theatre, considering them "more immediate, more improvisatory", and much more primitive compared to programmes recorded today. "Everything had to be done by hand, as it were. You couldn't get these marvellous special effects that you can do now. It was all do it yourself."

SFX broaches the fact that, after countless other stage and screen performances over the years, O'Brien is described in the biography of her latest novel as "best known for her role of Vicki in *Doctor Who*". She grimaces.

"Oh, I know, don't even speak of it! I accept it, but for many years I really was bitter about it, because I did some wonderful stuff, and it's all gone, except the only thing I'm remembered for, which was an aberration for me. I didn't know what I was letting myself in for, for the rest of my life! One little job in 1965…"

Nevertheless, O'Brien will always hold a special place in *Who* history. She effectively trialled what was to become a great British institution: the revolving door system of the *Doctor Who* companion.

Vicki's entrance through the TARDIS doors marked the very first time the audience was one step ahead – they already knew what magical wonders lay beyond them. Viewers instantly took to the 25th century orphan, and O'Brien's legacy remains in full force to this day. ●

Doctor Who: The Collection – Season Two is released on 5 December.

BRENTON THWAITES

The DC star talks growing up with Nightwing in *Titans*

Words by Bryan Cairns /// Photography by Christos Kalohoridis

Brenton Thwaites's road to Hollywood involved the same baptism by fire as many of his native Aussies: a stint in a soap opera. After 56 episodes of *Home And Away*, Thwaites capitalised on that momentum by relocating to the United States. The talented actor signed on to *Blue Lagoon: The Awakening* and the supernatural cult hit *Oculus*, before winning roles in blockbuster productions *Maleficent*, *Gods Of Egypt* and *Pirates Of The Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales*. These days, Thwaites keep the world safe as Batman's former sidekick, Nightwing, in *Titans*.

You've starred in some high-profile projects. What does success mean to you?

➔ Success to me is a bunch of things. Feeling successful, feeling fulfilled, feeling like you're doing your part to change the world and make good stories. As an actor, it's a mixture of doing what you feel you should be doing and having the balls to go and do that. It could be taking a pay cut to do an indie movie. It could be years of agonising over producing a story and trying to chase the rights to a property you really want. It could be going back home and getting involved in the Australian film industry, or all those things.

Your co-stars over the years have included Angelina Jolie, Jeff Bridges, Gerard Butler and Johnny Depp. Who impressed you the most?

➔ The actors I connected most with are probably Ewan McGregor and Jeff Bridges. Our characters had deep relationships with each other. We worked a lot together. We got along really well. They both acted as temporary mentors. Jeff and Ewan were family-orientated men. They seemed like they weren't affected by the rat race and vanity of Hollywood. Their insecurities were not Hollywood-based. They were just guys that were great actors and followed their creativity.

The Titans' new Big Bad is Brother Blood. In what ways is he unlike any foe the team has ever faced?

➔ He's smart, he's physical and he's from a world we don't know much about – the occult, the dark magic, the underground. He's not just a Deathstroke, where it's hard to physically beat him. He's not just a Scarecrow, who is super-smart. We need to use all of our experiences, and all of our minds, to come together to figure out where Blood is, how he's fighting, what he's after and how to destroy the thing that he's after.

Dick confronts Blood in the finale. Did that battle push you as an actor?

➔ There is a photo I can't wait to get out. It's me on the ground, just dead, unable to breathe, just giving a finger. "Fuck you guys!" I was so exhausted. I've never been that tired. My stunt double was like, "No one go near Brenton, for your own sake."

We had to shoot it in one day. It was this massive fight between all the Titans and Brother Blood, in a room where we are trying to stop him from doing this horrendous thing. He's physically dominant. In terms of one human without powers, fighting him, there's no chance. It's this dynamic, well-crafted coordinated effort to hit him with multiple powers, from different places. That's the only way we can defeat this guy, all of us together throwing everything we have, just to steal his concentration for a split second as we do something else and try to outsmart him. That day was one of the biggest fight days I have ever had.

A Nightwing feature film has been in the works for years. What are your thoughts about reprising the role for the big screen?

➔ I have thought about that. I would love to do that. It's not up to me, it's up to Warner Bros. Things at Warner Bros are changing quite drastically. Their next slate of films could be really exciting. We just have to wait and see. It would be a great honour to bring Nightwing to the big screen. If we were to do that, and if there was a bit of money behind a film version of Nightwing, it would be one of the greatest superhero stories out there.

In the comic book, a lot of the characters seem to take notice of Dick's tush. How does it feel to be the sex symbol of the DC Universe?

➔ I don't know what to say except I will keep doing some squats! That's cool. You look at the comics and both males and females are sexualised. That's just a part of the content to get people in. The episodes aren't about my ass, although it's not something I would shy away from or be offended by. It's the two-sided character. It's Dick Grayson and then when he puts the suit on, he's shiny. He's sexy, charismatic and a superhero. That's just part of it. ●

Titans is on HBO Max now. UK details are TBC.

BIODATA

From
Cairns, Australia

Greatest Hits
Aurora's husband Prince Phillip in *Maleficent*, young thief Bek in *Gods Of Egypt*, Will Turner's son Henry in *Pirates Of The Caribbean: Dead Men Tell No Tales*.

Random Fact
Thwaites's first paid job was mowing lawns with a friend, aged 11.

> “The episodes aren’t about my ass, although it’s not something I would shy away from”

NEVER SLEEP AGAIN (AGAIN)

LEADING LADY HEATHER LANGENKAMP AND DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY MARK IRWIN DISCUSS *WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE*, THE DIRECTOR'S BOLD ATTEMPT TO BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO THE *NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET* SERIES

WORDS: **OLIVER PFEIFFER**

WHILE 1996'S *SCREAM* IS THE FILM THAT'S remembered for bringing a self-referential, meta approach to horror, the late great Wes Craven had already laid the groundwork with the intended epilogue to his other iconic franchise, back in 1994.

To provide a more fitting finale to the *Nightmare On Elm Street* series (after the comedic pratfalls of *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare*), *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* brought back the horror by having the once wisecracking boogeyman enter the real world to wreak havoc upon the talent behind Freddy Krueger. Here actors and producers from the original film (and some of its sequels) would be portraying themselves in the movie. →

Heather Langenkamp as Heather Langenkamp.

Freddy's new look includes totally gnarly claws.

However, this was no mere Hollywood satire – it was an attempt to address what might happen if you banned Freddy and tried to suppress the entire culture of horror films. Craven's reasoning: that horror was inherent in the human experience and had to be dealt with by art in order to comprehend it.

"I started asking myself, 'Well, if you ban scary movies, what might that do to a culture that can't express that?'" he reflected in 2014. "The feeling was if you're going to ban Freddy he will come into your real life in some other form. That's the way I got through from one world to another. So, Freddy now had the power to attack the people who had portrayed him and was ultimately not Freddy any more, but the entities of whatever it is that is representative of him."

Actor Robert Englund returned to play both a version of himself and the revised incarnation of his iconic character. But for this pure personification of evil, Craven went back to what he had originally envisioned for the knife-clawed bogeyman.

To capture that primal terror, this "entity" was reinvented as a more menacing antagonist, largely devoid of the wisecracks. Freddy's aesthetic was modified too. He now donned a darkened version of the iconic red and green jumper, wore a long black overcoat and had more streamlined features and claws organically fused with his hands.

One of the familiar faces returning was original *Elm Street* heroine Heather Langenkamp, who had reprised Nancy seven years prior for *Nightmare On Elm Street Part III: Dream Warriors*, but in *New Nightmare* would be portraying a version of herself.

"That idea that you are who you play in the film is an idea that most actors would reject. However, Wes was experimenting with that breaking of the fourth wall," the actress tells *SFX*. "To create a character that was as close to me as possible without doing a reality TV show... well, I did have a lot of reservations at first."

"Wes wanted to bring Freddy back to the psychological mess of pure evil"

Those similarities included the character being portrayed as a young mother with an infant son, and one who was married to a special effects artist. In reality, Langenkamp was married to Oscar-winning make-up artist David LeRoy Anderson, who later worked on *The Nutty Professor* and *Men In Black*.

Shooting *New Nightmare* was future *Scream* director of photography Mark Irwin, who had shot horror classics like David Cronenberg's *Scanners*, *The Dead Zone* and *The Fly*, along with *The Blob* for *Dream Warriors* director Chuck Russell.

"Wes wanted to get a little purer and certainly make Freddy scary again," he says. "He was exploring every angle because he had created these characters and had seen all these other renditions and thought some were terrible. So he had Freddy inhabit not only dreams but the real world as well.

"I think the best way to make the bad guy worse is to make the victims more vulnerable and essentially under attack, and that's what happened to Heather's character," he continues. "The way she's attacked in bed with the claws coming through the sheets; the way her husband was attacked while he's driving... It was no longer, 'Don't go down that dark alley – something creepy is going to happen there!' It was always a neutral ground. And I think Wes decided he was going to [portray] the person that everybody talked to for help."

Indeed, not only would Craven play the pivotal role of the titular director of *New Nightmare*, but he would also be portraying himself onscreen too. This included a central scene where Langenkamp confronts the horror maestro at his Hollywood home about the secret development of a new *Elm Street* script. The events of this script take on a creepy life of their own, with the conversation between

Heather and on-screen son are plagued by visions.

Robert Englund as Robert Englund.

director and actor appearing as script dialogue on a monitor just moments after they've spoken them.

"Most directors don't appear in front of the camera unless it's a Hitchcock kind of cameo," observes Irwin. "Certainly in this role, Wes had to do more than just appear on camera – he had to open himself up, because this was all about vulnerability. He opened up a lot more than he had ever done as a director."

Originally events were to take an even more dramatic turn for the filmmaker. In an early version of the script, Craven was more of a victim who was on the run from Freddy, going to such extremes as cutting off his eyelids to try and stay awake as he continued writing the screenplay.

It wasn't just Craven that got to flex his acting muscles. *Elm Street* series producer Bob Shaye also turned up to try and coax Heather into playing Nancy one last time, in a scene shot at the actual New Line Cinema headquarters. "Both Wes and Heather would kind of push him, as he had this understated, calm delivery," laughs Irwin. "They said, 'We need more, you've got to be Bob Shaye!' And he would say, 'But I am Bob Shaye!' They replied, 'No, you're somebody else playing a much paler version of what we know you to be!'"

Stealing the show as Heather's spooky son Dylan, meanwhile, was then seven-year-old actor Miko Hughes, who had memorably portrayed creepy infant Gage Creed in *Pet Sematary*. "You get a lot of kid actors who have done plenty of TV, commercials and afterschool specials, but Miko was more of an actor than a kid actor," says Irwin. "Wes would give him notes, backstory and be respectful of his acting skills. He was very much a contributor.

"Acting for the camera is really hard and this kid understood what I needed, and he was crawling around in the pits of Hell with fire everywhere and understood the mechanics of it. He was a real pro and I think Wes definitely cast him well."

New Nightmare's climax blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy further. Heather's house morphs into Nancy's home from *Elm Street*, with both Langenkamp and a returning John Saxon (as her onscreen sheriff father) re-enacting lines from the denouement of the original *A Nightmare On Elm Street*, which allows Freddy to enter the real world. Reality eerily invaded the set too, with an actual earthquake mimicking the events of the film's faux quake; footage of the aftermath was inserted into the movie.

REALITY BITES

Despite a triumphant showdown in the subterranean pits of Hell between Heather, Dylan and Freddy, plus a glowing critical reception, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* didn't set the box office alight when it was released on 14 October 1994. This was particularly disappointing given that it was a smart precursor to Craven's own *Scream*, released a couple of years later.

"Wes was smart enough, when he discovered Johnny Depp at 16, to put him in the original movie, along with Heather Langenkamp," says Irwin, reflecting on *New Nightmare*'s lukewarm reception. "He knew that you put your audience in the movie. Teenagers want to see someone who is relatable.

"We both agreed that *New Nightmare* was more like going to a psychiatrist and talking about your inner fears instead of that teenage popcorn horror movie that Wes more or less created, recreated and maintained. It was kind of this ivory tower look at the monster."

"Wes wanted to bring Freddy back to the psychological mess of pure evil, and I think he was very successful," adds Langenkamp. "People either like one kind of Freddy or the other, and I think you can judge what kind of person they are with which version they prefer." ●

Wes Craven's New Nightmare is available on Prime Video and Blu-ray.

ALAMY

5 CREEPY MOMENTS FROM NEW NIGHTMARE

We celebrate some of the spine-tingling best bits from Wes Craven's *Nightmare On Elm Street* coda

1 CEILING MURDER

Some of the most chilling moments from *New Nightmare* are call-backs to the original, like the grisly hospital ceiling murder. Dylan's babysitter Julie (Tracy Middendorf) is unceremoniously gutted, dragged up the wall and onto the ceiling by "the entity" as the child (Miko Hughes) watches in horror. It mirrors the original film's memorable bedroom ceiling murder of Tina, with the same revolving set technique employed for its conception.

2 DOCTOR CLAWS

When stern yet dependable Dr Heffner (Fran Bennett) approaches a bedridden Dylan and proclaims to her staff, "Let's get him open, good and proper. Cut this evil out of him!" while pulling out Freddy's glove, you know events have taken a turn for the worse.

3 PHONE KISS

Heather Langenkamp unwisely takes a call from her alleged stalker but finds Freddy's hideously elongated tongue on the other line, in this quite literal call-back to the original.

4 DYLAN FREAKS

There are many unnerving moments with Langenkamp's onscreen son Dylan. Perhaps one of the most unsettling is when the actress finds him screaming in bed after taking a daytime nap, only for him to stop abruptly and repeat the immortal lines, "Never sleep again!" in a strangely distorted voice. Eerily familiar claw marks on Dylan's stuffed dinosaur toy are a nice touch.

5 CAR CLAW

We all know drowsy driving can kill, but Langenkamp's hubby Chase Porter (David Newsom) learns the hard way when, against all efforts to stay awake, he drifts off and is consequently disembowelled by a familiar disembodied claw.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

MICHAEL MOORCOCK

SF and fantasy's biggest beard tells us about myth in his work

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Joseph Branston

IN 1961, WHEN ELRIC OF MELNIBONÉ MADE HIS first appearance, Michael Moorcock was a young man in a hurry. Fast forward 60-plus years and Moorcock's new Elric novel *The Citadel Of Forgotten Myths* is shortly to be published. For all that Elric is one of Moorcock's Eternal Champions, a paladin who keeps Law and Chaos in Balance, this wasn't originally supposed to happen.

"I expected to do one story," Moorcock says down the line from his home in Texas. "I didn't have much interest in writing fantasy or science fiction at the time." At which point, editor John "Ted" Carnell intervened. Would Moorcock like to write a sword-and-sorcery story for *Science Fantasy* magazine? "And so I wrote it, and tried to make it as different as possible from anything else," remembers Moorcock.

Elric, introduced in the novella "The Dreaming City", was an immediate hit with readers. A conflicted, drug-snaffling albino antihero reliant for much of his power on a soul-devouring magic sword, Stormbringer, Elric has become Moorcock's most enduring character. So what's it like returning to someone you created in your twenties when you've hit your eighties?

"That's the problem, you have to try to keep it fast and furious, the way it started," Moorcock laughs, "but you're obviously of a more contemplative disposition." It helps, he says, that none of us ever entirely outgrow the "teenage angst" that's integral to Elric. Besides, teenagers too have to grapple with "moral dilemmas and consequences".

Incorporating elements of previous stories that have been "rejigged quite a bit", the latest novel is set early in the Elric timeline, between *Elric Of Melniboné* (1972) and *The Fortress Of The Pearl* (1989), and sees Elric wanting to learn more about the nature of the dragons of the Young Kingdoms. It would have been released to mark Elric's 60th birthday, except "[publishers] need about two years these days before they can start selling a book."

INTO THE WOODS

Without going too far into amateur analysis, this journeying back into the past is in keeping with Moorcock's recent work. Next year will see the publication of *The Woods Of Arcady*, the second volume in his Sanctuary Of The White Friars trilogy. In sometimes dizzying ways, the series combines autobiography with fantasy.

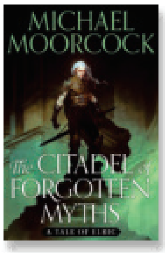
Why this approach? "[I was worried] about hurting people's feelings, people can get upset," he says. "Some people are dead, but their relatives are still around, and you don't want to give your version of events in that sense, because sometimes it clashes with theirs – and sometimes it's not very nice for them."

BIODATA

From
London

Greatest Hits
Moorcock is a multiple award winner whose fiction includes *Behold The Man*, *The Condition Of Muzak* and *Mother London*. As a musician, he's worked with Hawkwind and Blue Öyster Cult. He edited SF magazine *New Worlds* during the New Wave years when the magazine helped to rewire SF.

Random Fact
Moorcock quite enjoyed one aspect of the pandemic: it reminded him of a time when the shops closed early once a week and "the city became quiet".



There was another reason too. The White Friars books are also a "tribute to adventure stories, fantasy stories that I read when I was growing up". As we chat, Moorcock mentions Tarzan, Barbary pirates, highwaymen, historical fiction featuring Cavaliers and Roundheads, Robin Hood and penny dreadfuls.

"I'm also exploring the function of fantasy, particularly for me," he says, "wondering how much one retreats from real life into fantasy – exploring that and how it affects us." The books, he adds, are a "weird mixture" of the modernist novel and straight fantasy.

ENGLAND'S DREAMING

Layering in further meaning, Moorcock says they're a way for him to offer his take on his fictional Multiverse, a series of parallel universes in which so many of his books take place, "as an idea rather than as a device" – a plot device being how it's so often used in commercial movies. "It's to do with circumstance and context," he says of his own take on the multiverse. "The thing about the Multiverse for me is that you can shift one character into a different context and see how that character behaves, which won't be the same as the same character in a different situation."

These days, Moorcock's European home is an apartment in Paris, but he was born in London and grew up in the city. As we talk, it's clear the city remains close to his heart.

"I really am trying to bring back myth into my world, which has been demythologised by commerce," he says. "What's happened since Thatcher is that everything has to earn its own living, which includes every little borough in England, every little town, *everywhere*, so that everybody had to start finding fake mythology to sell to tourists." In Moorcock's estimation, this led to London being sanitised and simplified, something he rails against.

"I think that most children, given the advantage of a reasonable education, grow into reasonable adults," he says, pondering the darker mythologies that elites sometimes exploit, "but when they're frightened, as people are desperately frightened now on so many levels, they just become idiots." ●

The Citadel Of Forgotten Myths is published by Gollancz on 8 December.

“Publishers need about two years these days before they can start selling a book”

HALLOWEEN ENDS
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edited by Ian Berriman

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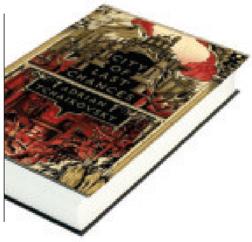

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BLACK PANTHER: WAKANDA FOREVER

Recipe for succession

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
12A | 163 minutes
Director **Ryan Coogler**
Cast **Letitia Wright, Tenoch Huerta, Lupita Nyong'o, Dominique Thorne, Angela Bassett, Martin Freeman**

There are times when *Wakanda Forever* feels like the best Marvel movie ever: Queen Ramonda delivering a blistering address to the UN; Shuri and Namor enmeshed in knife-edge, *Game Of Thrones*-style diplomacy; an eerie night-time attack by water-breathing warriors on a US ship. Then, moments later, some bendy CG stunt double backflips through the laws of physics, or an unnecessary crossover character makes a clumsy quip, and you can't help thinking it'd be better off not being a Marvel film at all.

Wakanda Forever has a lot to live up to. The original *Black Panther* was a huge commercial and critical hit, the first superhero movie ever to earn an Oscar nomination for Best Picture (unless you count *Birdman*, but who does?). It also brought a new audience to the MCU, with its vibrant celebration of black culture and heritage. So this film comes with a huge weight of expectation. Meeting that is a goal made significantly more difficult by the death of Chadwick Boseman, whose noble yet endearing performance as T'Challa was a massive part of the first film's success.

Marvel decided not to recast, and so *Wakanda Forever* becomes a tribute to both the actor and the character he played, opening with the death and funeral of T'Challa – all very movingly achieved. The story then becomes the search for a new Black Panther (not easy, since Killmonger destroyed all the sacred plants that bestowed the power of the Panther in the first film) while never letting you forget T'Challa's legacy.

Following the death of T'Challa, the Wakandan crown passes to his mum Ramonda (the politics behind this is never clearly explained, but never mind), and she has a lot on her plate. Since the world learned of Wakanda's horde of vibranium, there have been repeated attempts by various countries to steal some of the powerful ore. This must stop, warns the Queen. What she doesn't know is that the US has invented a vibranium detector, which has located a source on the sea bed. When a team is sent to retrieve it, they awaken a Kraken instead. Sorta…

"The Sub-Mariner? Never heard of him."

Say hello to the undersea kingdom of Talokan, ruled by Namor, aka the Sub-Mariner – not that he's ever called by his comic book alter-ego name in the movie, though we do get his catchphrase: "Imperious Rex!" (In the comics he rules Atlantis, but the MCU has given his domain an Aztec make-over for purely artistic reasons and not *Aquaman*-beat-us-to-the-screen reasons, no siree.) Anyway, Talokan has its own reserves of vibranium which, like Wakanda, it doesn't want to share. Unlike Wakanda, it's prepared to declare war on the

> **"On many levels, it's the best Marvel movie in a long while"**

“I kind of wish we'd brought some guns, to be honest.”

surface world to protect its way of life, and Namor would rather have Wakanda as an ally than an enemy.

On many levels, this is the best Marvel movie in a long while, with a powerful, often edgy story that feels akin to *The Winter Soldier* and *Civil War*. Shuri (Letitia Wright) takes centre stage as the Panther in waiting, and does a decent enough job, though the support characters are all beefed up this time, with particularly fun performances from Danai Gurira as Okoye and Winston Duke as M'Baku. Even though it's the second-longest MCU movie yet, it's pacy and keeps the twists coming, while the Talokan threat is supported by some impressively cataclysmic effects sequences.

Tenoch Huerta, however, is a disappointingly bland Namor, the righteous indignation and arrogance of the comic character replaced by a kind of weary smugness that feels at odds with a guy with wings on his feet. And while he brings more diversity to the mix, the film misses the more personal, relatable, street-level vibe Killmonger added.

The introduction of Riri Williams, aka Ironheart (Dominique Thorne), feels like an superfluous advert for her upcoming TV series. Then there's the usual Marvel over-reliance on CG for the fight scenes; the *Black Panther* films would really benefit from a more realistic James Bond-style approach to stunts.

The problems are minor, though, and once again director Ryan Coogler manages to play within the MCU while bringing his own more interesting toys with him. **Dave Golder**

i When Tenoch Huerta was cast as water-breathing antihero Namor he didn't know how to swim, and had to take lessons.

MIND PROBE

LUPITA NYONG'O

Nakia in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*

LIA TOBY/GETTY

How prominent was Chadwick Boseman in everyone's minds during filming?

→ Completely prominent. We had a beautiful mural of T'Challa on one of our walls. Shortly after Chadwick passed, Ryan [Coogler] sent me a photo, taken on his iPhone, of me and Chadwick on set. I printed that and framed it, and had it in my trailer. I said hello and goodbye to him every morning. So he was very present, and we talked about him a lot.

Was it a cathartic experience, in any sense?

→ Yes, completely. He passed during the lockdown period of our lives. So there was very little opportunity to come together as a community. I was very lucky to be able to attend his funeral, and we had a virtual service for the cast and crew. But we hadn't really been together since the news that he'd left us. To go back to Wakanda, and have him sorely missing, was hard. We created Wakanda as if he was the sun, you know? He was the sun! But it was also definitely therapeutic, because we were coming back to the origins of our bond, and carrying it forward. **MM**

"Ho ho hooooooOAAA AAAAARRGHH HHHHHH!"

VIOLENT NIGHT

Slay ride

★★★★☆

RELEASED 2 DECEMBER

15 | 101 minutes

Director **Tommy Wirkola**

Cast **David Harbour, John Leguizamo, Beverly D'Angelo, Cam Gigandet**

If you're old enough to recall the moral outrage at the depiction of a brutal Santa Claus in 1984's *Silent Night, Deadly Night*, you might be surprised to learn of a new movie (the work of *Dead Snow* director Tommy Wirkola) featuring Jolly Saint Nick as a ruthless warrior. But unlike its predecessor and despite the *very* intense content, *Violent Night* is absolutely bloody hilarious.

Santa (a perfectly cast David Harbour) is not quite the happy old man you might imagine – the only Christmas cheer he has is due to the copious amounts of booze he's knocking back during his annual present deliveries. But then he stumbles across a child in peril and quite literally finds himself caught in the crossfire of a dysfunctional family under siege.

What follows takes the naughty list to the extreme, as each kill gets gorier and more inventive – you'll never look at fairy lights or the star on top of a Christmas tree in quite the same way again. The final kill is absolutely inspired. And we can probably all relate to even the nicest of people finally having their *Falling Down* moment...

People will be crying laughing one minute and throwing up the next. See this in a cinema with as many people as possible – this new Christmas classic is an outrageously funny shared experience. **Darren Scott**

i The cast includes Beverly D'Angelo, star of *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* – a film Tommy Wirkola watches every year.

MATILDA THE MUSICAL

Child's Play

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 117 minutes

Director **Matthew Warchus**

Cast **Emma Thompson, Lashana Lynch, Stephen Graham, Andrea Riseborough**

Parental neglect and institutionalised child abuse might not seem ideal subjects for a feel-good family musical.

Like *Annie* and *Oliver!* before it, though, this exuberant adaptation of Roald Dahl's book ensures the hardships come thick and fast, secure in the knowledge that every injustice its title character suffers at the hands of unfeeling grown-ups will only make her eventual triumph over them taste all the sweeter.

Relocated to home soil after Danny DeVito's 1996 Americanisation, Matthew Warchus's transposition of his own stage success sees plucky young bookworm Matilda Wormwood (Alisha Weir) escape the clutches of her mean-spirited parents (Andrea Riseborough and Stephen Graham) only to find an even viler authority figure in sadistic schoolmarm Miss Trunchbull (Emma Thompson). Fortunately Matilda has the power of imagination on her side, not to mention the sort of latent telekinetic abilities that made Stephen King's Carrie such a handful back in 1976.

It all adds up to an entertaining adaptation.

Weir and her fellow pupils at the foreboding Crunchem Hall are a lively lot, who sing the numbers penned for them by comedian Tim Minchin with zesty aplomb. It's Thompson, however, who steals the show, her prosthetics-assisted portrayal of their ghastly overlord dominating the action as surely as her bulk commands the frame. Lashana Lynch provides an appealing counterpoint as kindly teacher Miss Honey.

There's wit and charm aplenty in a film that gleefully shares Dahl's appetite for the gross and grotesque. A shame, though, that its climax relies so heavily on the kind of bombastic CG overkill that's usually reserved for DC and Marvel movies. **Mark Samuels**

i Dahl's first draft was heavy on gambling, with Matilda's powers used to manipulate a horse race. He completely rewrote it.

THE MENU

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 106 minutes

Director **Mark Mylod**

Cast **Anya Taylor-Joy, Ralph Fiennes, Nicholas Hoult, John Leguizamo**

The thing about tasting menus is that the first bite of an "amuse bouche" is always delicious. *The Menu* is the same; it whets the appetite with an intriguing bunch of food nerds, tech bros and movie stars each spending $12,000 for an evening at Hawthorne, a fine dining restaurant on a remote island, led by celebrated chef Julian Slowick (Ralph Fiennes).

The first act's delectable, with a phenomenal Fiennes clapping with an almost sexual ferocity to announce each course while the guests slowly realise that among all the emulsions, gels and edible snows, something is amiss.

Unfortunately, as it continues, what is served up becomes increasingly unappetising. For those who have worked in restaurants, the film nails the strange parasocial dynamic between restaurant staff and their customers, but then lets go of that well-realised thread for much blander satire around class and capitalism.

The secrets revealed range from inconsequential to bizarre, and Slowick's motives become increasingly nebulous. And while the film is bold enough to reference folk horror classic *The Wicker Man*, it lacks the conviction needed to reach its audacious heights. There are some solid laughs and scares throughout, but by the time dessert arrives consuming *The Menu* has sadly become more of a chore than a treat.

Leila Latif

NOCEBO

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 8 DECEMBER

15 | 97 minutes

Director **Lorcan Finnegan**

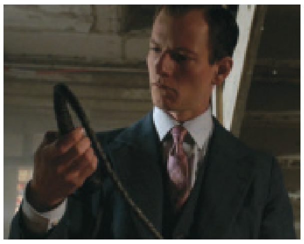
Cast **Eva Green, Mark Strong, Chai Fonacier, Billie Gadsdon**

That scientific title seems a curiously clinical choice. The nocebo effect is the opposite of the placebo: if you're given a sugar pill and warned of side effects, it may cause you to exhibit them. The concept can be used to explain the effects of a curse. But here it's pretty clear that the supernatural is real.

Eva Green plays a mother suffering from a mysterious condition. When Filipino carer Diana turns up out of the blue, Christine is initially as sceptical of her folk remedies as her hubby is, but falls increasingly under her influence…

The latest team-up by the writer and director behind *Vivarium*, *Nocebo* doesn't hold the surrealistic intrigue of that film, and for much of its duration is a rather ho-hum affair. Shooting took place in Ireland and the Philippines, and Diana's backstory proves more engaging than the domestic power struggle. Memorably Cronenbergian nightmares also rub shoulders with smirk-inducing moments where, say, Diana sinisterly plays a toy xylophone.

However, it pays off once the shoe drops on motivation, with everything from the couple's resentment-inducingly well-appointed middle class home to the recurring imagery of parasitism neatly clicking into place. An unexpectedly political chiller, which makes a modest contribution to the debate about First World exploitation. **Ian Berriman**



DAWN BREAKS BEHIND THE EYES

★★★½☆

RELEASED 2 DECEMBER

18 | 76 minutes

Director **Kevin Kopacka**

Cast **Luisa Taraz, Frederik von Lüttichau, Anna Platen, Jeff Wilbusch**

If you'd just inherited a crumbling gothic castle – dusty candelabras, spooky wine cellar, spiders and all – would you head up to take a look at it after nightfall?

The couple at the heart of this giallo-inspired, German-language reality-bender do, as if director Kevin Kopacka wanted to make sure from the start that viewers know not to take anything here too literally. Things only get stranger and more ill-advised from there, with an early major rug-pull changing everything.

Deliberately opaque and eye-poppingly psychedelic, this is a film that asks a lot of its viewers. It's going to divide opinion: is it satisfyingly smart, or smugly self-satisfied? Enjoyably strange or just confusing? Your experience may vary, depending on your patience for '70s Euro-horror homage and wilful ambiguity.

No matter what you think of the plot, though, it's an undeniably beautiful piece of cinema. The production design is immaculate, while the use of light, shadow and colour is frequently breathtaking. The performances, too, are weird but wonderful: Luisa Taraz gives great gothic heroine, while Frederik von Lüttichau wouldn't look out of place in a German Expressionist nightmare. You won't have seen anything else quite like it.

Sarah Dobbs

PREY FOR THE DEVIL

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 93 minutes

Director **Daniel Stamm**

Cast **Jacqueline Byers, Posy Taylor, Colin Salmon, Virginia Madsen**

First scheduled for a February release as *The Devil's Light*, this meaninglessly-titled exorcism horror (are we supposed to root for Satan?) manifested at Halloween without any press screenings.

You can see why, as it doesn't have much to distinguish it, beyond a female protagonist and various attempts to make the genre more "relatable". Out go dusty old fossils like Father Merrin. In comes a Boston exorcism school attended by priests so doe-eyed they could form a boy band, and nun Sister Anne (Jacqueline Byers), who rocks a camo T-shirt and jog-pants off-duty, and whose bond with young patient Natalie leads to her being allowed to sit in on lectures.

The Catholic church is Bond-ified too, with the possessed enclosed in passcard-access cells (the question "How is this legal?" repeatedly springs to mind) and exorcists handed suitcases you half expect to contain an exploding pen as well as a crucifix.

Elliptical storytelling, with certain developments reported not seen, makes you suspicious of edit room jiggery-pokery. Colin Salmon provides gravitas as a senior priest, and there's one half-decent twist – albeit one you can see coming a mile off. Otherwise, it's a banal affair, with all the CG contortionism and scrambling up walls you'd expect. **Ian Berriman**

Ferrix: the galactic equivalent of Hull.

DRINKING GAME

Knock back a beverage of your choice every time…

- **Someone threatens to kill or capture Cassian Andor.**
- **Someone pretends to be looking for an antique in Luthen's shop as cover for Rebel business.**
- **The sound of a beaten anvil rings out over the town square on Ferrix.**

- **Syril Karn is harshly belittled by his mum over dinner.**
- **A character says, "on program". (Wait for episode eight!)**
- **Cassian shoots someone – extra swig if unarmed.**

ANDOR Season One

No need to Force it

★★★★½

UK/US **OUT NOW!**

Showrunner **Tony Gilroy**

Cast **Diego Luna, Genevieve O'Reilly, Stellan Skarsgård, Denise Gough, Kyle Soller, Fiona Shaw, Adria Arjona**

EPISODES 1.01-1.12 ***Andor* shares its** name with one of the Rebels who died obtaining the Death Star plans in *Rogue One*, but Disney+'s latest *Star Wars* prequel is about much more than one man. This is a Rebel Alliance origin story of impressive scale and complexity, a series that simultaneously complements existing canon while sending the *Star Wars* galaxy in a thrilling new direction.

Jedi, Sith and other Force-wielders are conspicuous by their absence in Andor's corner of the universe. Yes, the Emperor gets the occasional mention, but the show's creator/showrunner Tony Gilroy (the *Bourne* screenwriter widely credited with fixing *Rogue One* via reshoots) has little interest in falling back on any tried and tested *Star Wars* formula.

In *Andor*, the camera work is jittery, the synth-heavy score (from *Succession*'s Nicholas Britell) is more Vangelis than John Williams, and the fan-friendly references to the wider universe are kept to a minimum. It's only the occasional sighting of a droid, blaster or TIE Fighter that reminds you the action's taking place a long way from home.

While *Andor* sometimes feels like a *Star Wars* story that's trying to be anything but *Star Wars*, it also builds on the legacy George Lucas created 45 years ago. The Galactic Empire has never been as chilling as the arrogantly malevolent entity portrayed here – indeed, with their *Brazil*-like approach to bureaucracy and torture, *Andor*'s lower-level Imperials prove significantly scarier than an old bloke shooting lightning from his fingertips.

It's also impressive how the 12-part season marshals such a large cast of characters, each with their own unique ideology. They talk like human beings with believable motivations – something that isn't always true in *Star Wars* – while the smart scripts leave you to make up your own mind about who's good, who's bad and who's in-between.

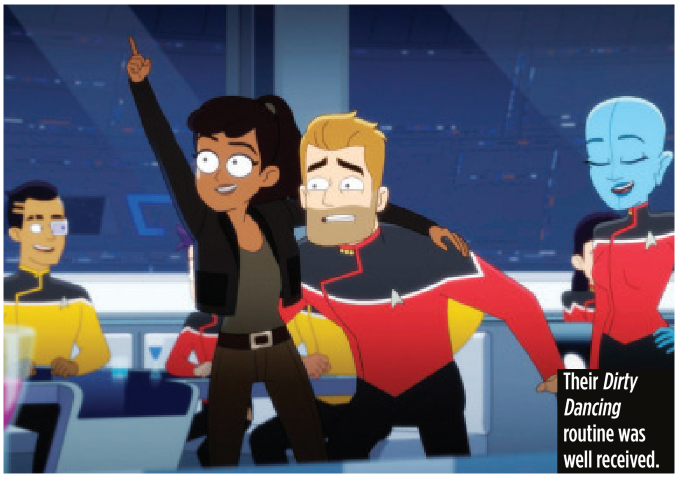
Fiona Shaw is typically brilliant as Cassian's adoptive mum, Maarva, but Denise Gough (as ambitious Imperial officer Dedra Meero) and Stellan Skarsgård (as Luthen Rael, the antiques dealer covertly pulling strings for the nascent Alliance) are the scene-stealers. Perhaps ironically, it's the eponymous Cassian (played by the returning Diego Luna) who's least well served by the story, his journey from nihilistic petty criminal to proto-freedom fighter so internalised that we never really get to know him.

While Cassian himself isn't easy to warm to, however, that's probably intentional. This first run is so perfectly structured that it leaves you certain that *Andor* knows exactly where it's going, and that everything will make sense by the end of the already confirmed second (and final) season. **Richard Edwards**

i ILM recycled assets from the prequel trilogy (such as the Galactic Senate) to create *Andor*'s version of Coruscant.

STAR TREK: LOWER DECKS Season Three

Paying Visitor a visit



Their *Dirty Dancing* routine was well received.

★★★★☆

UK **Prime Video, streaming now**

US **Paramount+, streaming now**

▶ Showrunner **Mike McMahan**

▶ Cast **Tawny Newsome, Jack Quaid, Noël Wells, Eugene Cordero**

EPISODES 3.01-3.10 **After the first** few episodes of *Lower Decks* season three you begin to wonder if there's any real point in reviewing it. Everything feels business as usual for the animated *Trek* parody – except, perhaps, that the nerdy *Trek* references are more obscure than ever.

It's still fun, but feels like it's going through the motions, and a couple of repeated gags about the Kelvin timeline and the similarity of *Trek*'s alien races suggest that the show is running out of ideas. Then, mid-season, it suddenly steps up a few warps.

There's a hilarious visit to *Deep Space Nine* ("Just circle around and pretend we're in awe of the pylons!" says Ransom before a priceless recreation of *DS9*'s opening titles) with Nana Visitor (Kira) and Armin Shimerman (Quark) guest starring. There's a clever concept episode about the misadventures of rogue exocomp Peanut Hamper (from the season one finale), in which the Cerritos crew appear only as guest stars. There's a brutally self-mocking episode about a Starfleet recruitment booth at a job fair written by creator Mike McMahan, with a subplot for Rutherford that has a far-reaching impact on the show overall. And there's a touching sequel to the holomovie episode "Crisis Point", with a killer twist.

> **"The nerdy Trek references are more obscure than ever"**

It all culminates in a thrilling two-parter that feels like a series – rather than just a season – finale, with a punch-the-air climax and oodles of closure, which also makes you realise quite how cunningly the arc plot has been handled. Roll on the *Strange New Worlds* crossover. **Dave Golder**

i Meta gag alert: a standee of Kirk and Spock in one episode shows them as they looked in *Star Trek: The Animated Series*.

CABINET OF CURIOSITIES Season One

Furnishing frights

Marmite Man: love him or hate him, he'll kill you.

★★★★½

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

▶ Creator **Guillermo del Toro**

▶ Cast **F Murray Abraham, Ben Barnes, Essie Davis, Rupert Grint**

EPISODES 1.01-1.08 **Guillermo del** Toro's anthology show reminds you how far TV horror has come in the last decade. Despite its rather quaint title and *Twilight Zone* framing, it's strong meat. Del Toro does a Rod Serling, opening each story by producing a prop and a figurine of its director – a cute way of honouring an impressively international line-up.

Some episodes are wholly original, others adapted from existing stories, but there are unifying themes. We usually visit the past, be it the '70s, '50s or '30s. A couple are EC Comics-esque tales of deplorable protagonists getting just desserts. Two expand upon stories by del Toro's beloved HP Lovecraft. And it's a decent bet that any given episode will include demonic entities (expect thrashing tentacles), themes of possession or parasitism, or wince-inducing scenes of organ removal or ocular trauma. Desiccated corpses, disturbing nightmares, self-mutilation and sinister goo also recur.

It's a gloomy, gothic show, with impressive production design: rooms cluttered with period artefacts; grotty, worn patinas. You can picture the construction crew painstakingly distressing surfaces.

There are mis-steps: Crispin Glover tarnishes "Pickman's Model" with an accent that swings between Dick Van Dyke Cockney, David Boreanaz Irish, and possibly Bulgarian – often mid-vowel. Ana Lily Amirpour overdoes the wide-angle lenses in "The Outside", a warped fable about self-acceptance; it's like watching via a carnival mirror. But the overall standard is high.

"The Viewing" is particularly memorable. It's slight, just a long tease before a monstrous unveiling – but *Mandy* director Panos Cosmatos's hazy visuals and a reptilian performance from Peter Weller help it stand out from the crowd, making the case for greater stylistic variety. **Ian Berriman**

i "The Outside" is based on *Some Other Animal's Meat*, a webcomic by Emily Carroll. Read it here: bit.ly/outsidecomic.

HOUSE OF THE DRAGON Season One

Blond On Blonde

★★★★☆

UK **Sky Atlantic/NOW, streaming now**

US **HBO Max, streaming now**

Creators **Ryan Condal, George RR Martin**

Cast **Paddy Considine, Matt Smith, Emma D'Arcy, Olivia Cooke**

EPISODES 1.01-1.10 **After the colossal** success of *Game Of Thrones*, HBO put numerous spin-off shows into development; it's easy to see why author George RR Martin was so keen to make this one.

A dramatisation of *Fire & Blood* (Martin's faux-historical account of the Targaryen dynasty), it's the saga of an incestuous, power-hungry family who just happen to keep dragons as pets. It also turns out that the Targaryens are every bit as dysfunctional as *Game Of Thrones* led us to believe – albeit in a subtler, more humanised way.

Set a couple of centuries before the parent show, this is a medieval *Succession* in the most literal sense, as various interested parties vie to inherit the throne of kindly King Viserys (Paddy Considine). While the king's beloved daughter Rhaenyra (Milly Alcock, later Emma D'Arcy) has his blessing, most of Westeros – most notably his wayward brother Daemon (Matt Smith) – isn't ready to embrace the idea of a woman on the Iron Throne. So, in the long-established tradition of the Seven Kingdoms, the stage is set for powerful people doing pretty much anything to stop her taking the crown.

House Of The Dragon spends its early episodes waiting to catch fire, at times feeling more like a slow-burn historical recreation than a drama. With time jumps aplenty – not all of them particularly well signposted – the episodes race through decades, with some characters recast while others remain implausibly untouched by the passage of time.

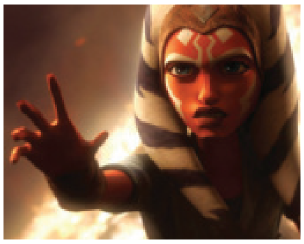
When the show does explode into life, however, it's worth the wait, as the backstabbing, nepotism and bare-faced ambition reach fever pitch. This familial civil war may be (for the moment) more about words than actions on the battlefield, but social gatherings have a habit of being just as memorable – for all the wrong reasons – as they were in *Game Of Thrones*.

Moments of extreme violence are never far away, but the show saves its most harrowing moments for its numerous scenes of mothers in labour; the way it effectively weaponises childbirth against its female characters comes to feel both tiring and distasteful, and is arguably the biggest misstep of the season.

Packed with political intrigue, the show recognises that although some people do bad things because they're bad people, key moments in history also pivot on errors of judgement or simple misunderstandings. Plus those dragons – and there are plenty of them – have an important role to play too. **Richard Edwards**

Daemon: the very definition of a creepy uncle.

i *House Of The Dragon* season one is out on Blu-ray on 19 December. 70 minutes of bonuses include two exclusive featurettes.



STAR WARS: TALES OF THE JEDI Season One

★★★½☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**

Creator **Dave Filoni**

Cast **Ashley Eckstein, Corey Burton, Liam Neeson, Ian McDiarmid**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Lucasfilm** continues its mission to fill every conceivable gap in *Star Wars* canon with this collection of Jedi-themed CG shorts. With each episode clocking in around the 15-minute mark, there isn't time for deep meditations on the nature of the Force. Instead, it highlights pivotal moments in the evolution of Anakin Skywalker's apprentice Ahsoka Tano, and aspiring Sith Lord Count Dooku.

The instalments vary greatly in quality. While a trip back to baby Ahsoka's first encounter with the Force feels a tad pointless, Dooku's chilling fall from grace is a welcome addition to the ever-expanding mythology.

Series creator Dave Filoni (the brains behind *The Clone Wars* and *Rebels*) seamlessly blends existing lore with beautifully animated lightsaber action. And bringing back live-action stars Liam Neeson and Ian McDiarmid alongside animation mainstays Ashley Eckstein and Corey Burton ensures continuity with both movie and TV branches.

The series relies so heavily on prior knowledge that it's one for hardcore fans rather than casual viewers. But it's a format with plenty of potential, Don't be surprised if Disney+ starts telling stories of Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn in the near future. **Richard Edwards**

WEDNESDAY Season One

Strange Little Girl

“Right, who ordered the fish? Sorry, no chips.”

★★★☆☆

UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**

▸ Showrunners **Alfred Gough, Miles Millar**

▸ Cast **Jenna Ortega, Gwendoline Christie, Emma Myers, Percy Hynes White, Riki Lindhome**

EPISODES 1.01-1.07 **Tim Burton was** originally supposed to direct the 1991 *Addams Family* movie, and then an animated *Addams Family* movie in the early 2010s. Now he finally gets to bring his vision of Charles Addams’s altogether ooky family to the screen as executive producer and co-director on *Wednesday*, a Netflix series developed by *Smallville* creators Alfred Gough and Miles Millar.

Spotlighting the family’s doll-guillotining, brother-torturing über-goth daughter, *Wednesday* fills a *Sabrina*-shaped hole in Netflix’s schedule: a supernatural comedy with a quirky female-dominated cast, in a high-school setting with a mystery arc plot. When Wednesday is removed from normal high school for emptying piranhas into the swimming pool, she’s sent to her parents’ old place of learning, the Nevermore Academy. Think Hogwarts for little monsters, with *Game Of Thrones*’ Gwendoline Christie as a towering headmistress and former Wednesday Christina Ricci as the only muggle – sorry, normie – teacher on the staff.

It’s creepy and kooky with some deliciously dark humour, droll one-liners (“We want our students to be well-rounded”/“I’d prefer to remain sharp-edged”) and some memorably bizarre set-pieces, including a ball that goes full *Carrie* and an explosive school concert. There are also some good backstories for Wednesday’s classmates: a deviant werewolf whose parents wants to send her for conversion therapy; a siren escaping the clutches of a cult.

But if you’re tuning in for an extended Burton movie, you’ll be disappointed. The director’s signature weirdness is largely on a backburner, igniting only occasionally, while Jenna Ortega makes for a rather bland Wednesday, who’s difficult to warm to. You can’t help thinking that Wednesday works better as a one-note supporting gag, but the series is still worth watching for the moments when everything does *click, click*. **Dave Golder**

i Showrunners Millar & Gough are namechecked in the show as a firm of realtors.

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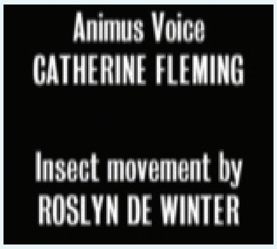
- **The words Doctor Oho form inexplicably in the title sequence.**
- **William Hartnell fluffs the name Chesterfi… Chesterton.**
- **The glorious credit “Insect movement by Roslyn De Winter” flashes up.**



Animus Voice
CATHERINE FLEMING

Insect movement by
ROSLYN DE WINTER

- **The Doctor clasps his lapels (bonus swig for a “Hmm?”)**
- **Companions Ian and Barbara look distinctly post-coital.**
- **The Doctor calls Susan or Vicki “child”.**

DOCTOR WHO Season Two

The Monochrome Set

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED 5 DECEMBER
1964/1965 | **PG** | **Blu-ray**
Producer **Verity Lambert**
Cast **William Hartnell, Carole Ann Ford, William Russell, Jacqueline Hill, Maureen O’Brien, Peter Purves**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The first ’60s** season to be spiffed up for Blu-ray, *Doctor Who*’s second run is as much about change as doubling-down on everything that made the series a hit.

The Daleks return, now enslaving Earth, establishing the alien invasion trope so essential to *Who*’s future DNA. Milking their cultural phenomenon status for all it’s worth, the season wheels the pepperpots back on again in “The Chase”, a time-jumping, cosmos-spanning romp that plays to writer Terry Nation’s childhood love of cliffhanging serials.

Elsewhere the show miniaturises its heroes in “Planet Of Giants” and attempts a bizarre alien worldscape in the equally ambitious “The Web Planet”, ending up with a surrealist space-bug ballet. Crucially, the show’s status quo shifts as original stars depart and new TARDISnauts arrive, establishing a cycle that becomes part of the show’s lifeblood.

At the heart of it all is William Hartnell’s magnetic turn as the Doctor, equal parts flinty and whimsical, wizard and grump. Be warned: two episodes of “The Crusade” are missing, victim of a short-sighted BBC purge. Thankfully “The Chase” tells us that “anything that ever happens is recorded in light neutrons”, accessible by a space-time visualiser. There’s hope yet. Until then this black and white box of delights is the next best thing.

Extras Matthew Sweet interviews nonagenarian star William Russell (49 minutes), whose fond reminiscences offer a fascinating glimpse of the seemingly unknowable Hartnell. Sweet also chats to his fellow companion Maureen O’Brien (74 minutes), who’s captivatingly frank as she discusses the downside of small-screen fame and her insecurities as an actor. Fronted by the dependably sympathetic Toby Hadoke, a documentary on story editor David Whitaker (61 minutes) goes in search of one of the show’s most crucial yet elusive figures and edges us a little closer to knowing a clearly complex man.

An excellent, comprehensive overview of the season (46 minutes) includes insights into producer Verity Lambert, while a featurette on ’60s merchandise and its collectors (23 minutes) will thrill anyone whose heart leaps at the words “inflatable Dalek punching bag”.

Elsewhere, six of the nine stories get the *Behind The Sofa* treatment. There’s also convention panel footage from 1985, an audio commentary on part one of “The Crusade” discussing its recovery, reconstructions of the missing episodes, a Dalek-cameoing sketch from a 1965 Canadian comedy show (14 minutes) and various extras from the DVDs – plus a wealth of documentation in PDF form (4203 pages!). **Nick Setchfield**

i For every 400 Dalek badges sold at the height of Dalekmania, only one badge of wannabe-rival monsters the Zarbi shifted.

WE ARE NOT ALONE

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | TBC | VOD

Director **Fergal Costello**

Cast **Declan Baxter, Vicki Pepperdine, Mike Wozniak, Joe Thomas**

UKTV PLAY **Created by the** people behind *Ghosts*, this original film for Dave is one of those comedies where every character is basically an idiot. You could arguably say the same of *Red Dwarf*, but that show played with some neat SF concepts. *We Are Not Alone* feels more one-dimensional.

Mostly set six weeks after a takeover by the alien Gu'un (pronounced "goon"), it's centred on Clitheroe, where the UK's new overlords have – with typical cluelessness – set up shop, reasoning that the Lancashire town is at the country's geographical centre. Our entry-point character is unambitious planning officer Stewart (Declan Baxter), who's bribed into acting as a man-on-the-street consultant for the eager-to-be-liked aliens.

Taking place largely in the borough council's offices, it looks cheap as chips, and LOLs are thin on the ground. There's solid character work from Mike Wozniak as trigger-happy Gu'un "Gordan", but most of the humour is of the culture clash variety. Some of the repeated gags are rather flogged to death, and most are pretty juvenile – like the way hearing the aliens' true names causes humans to vacate their bowels.

The aim was to create a pilot for a potential series, but if UKTV do decide to greenlight one, the writers will surely need to raise the level. **Ian Berriman**

Lost Hearts: very much not one for children.

GHOST STORIES FOR CHRISTMAS Volume One

The James gang

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 5 DECEMBER

1968-1973 | 12 | Blu-ray

Directors **Jonathan Miller, Lawrence Gordon Clark**

Cast **Michael Hordern, Robert Hardy, Peter Vaughan, Clive Swift**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Revived in recent** years by Mark Gatiss, the BBC's *A Ghost Story For Christmas* strand was an annual shudderfest, chiefly adapting the tales of MR James. Freshly remastered, the first four offerings arrive in HD, their power to slide beneath the skin intact.

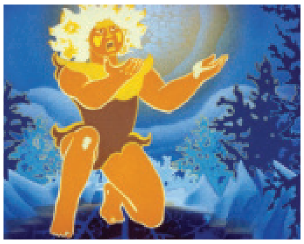
Technically 1968's black-and-white *Whistle And I'll Come To You* is an outlier, part of the *Omnibus* strand and directed by TV polymath Jonathan Miller. But its haunted East Anglian landscapes and portrait of a man driven to mental collapse by half-sketched paranormal forces make it a clear spiritual cousin, if not outright inspiration.

The Stalls Of Barchester delivers some deliciously understated chills as Robert Hardy's rationalist archdeacon confronts "the dark season", while *A Warning To The Curious* is a masterclass in creeping doom, cursed treasure exacting its price. The dread of *Lost Hearts* may be punctured by a rather ripe turn by Joseph O'Conor as a conniving immortalist but it supplies the darkest themes and most macabre imagery of all.

Christmas tradition they may have been, but there's nothing festive here – just the hard, bleak light of winter.

Extras New expert-led audio commentaries from Jon Dear on *Whistle* and *Warning* and Kim Newman and Sean Hogan on *Stalls* and *Lost Hearts*. You also get the extras from the original DVD releases, including introductions by Lawrence Gordon Clark and Christopher Lee reading *Stalls* and *Warning* in his inimitably mellifluous tones (60 minutes). Plus: essay booklet. **Nick Setchfield**

i Writer/director Lawrence Gordon Clark said he approached *A Warning To The Curious* as "essentially, a silent film".



SON OF THE WHITE MARE

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1981 | 12 | Blu-ray

Director **Marcell Jankovics**

Cast **György Cserhalmi, Vera Pap, Mari Szemes**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Transformation** is key in this breathtakingly fluid Hungarian animated film.

Based on folk tale *Fehérlófia*, it sees three human offspring of a white mare descending to the underworld to rescue three princesses from dragons. As is the way of such things, the plot is basic and repetitive – though the depiction of the dragons holds interest. A baby-faced rock-monster; a walking tank; a mass of skyscrapers – they're more like end-of-level bosses.

What makes it captivating is its dizzyingly protean nature. Forms are endlessly dissolving, changing colour, giving birth; our perspective on events revolving. Characters morph into landscapes or patterns, or advance as if to exit the screen. As director Marcell Jankovics twists the kaleidoscope, the results verge on lysergic. A film that demands rapt attention – you're almost afraid to blink for fear of missing something.

Extras Jankovics's 1973 feature *János Vitéz* (78 minutes) adapts an epic poem about a soldier's fantastical adventures; its eye-pleasing style is indebted to *Yellow Submarine*. You also get two artful B&W shorts and a 1968 Air India ad; in an engaging interview (33 minutes), the director explains how the latter defined his style. Plus: a period newsreel; a featurette that recyclessome of the 2020 interview; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

WORZEL GUMMIDGE

SFX Loves ★★★★★

The original straw man scrubs up nicely

★★★★★ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED 19 DECEMBER

1979-1981 | **PG** | **Blu-ray/DVD**

Director **James Hill**

Cast **Jon Pertwee, Una Stubbs, Charlotte Coleman, Jeremy Austin**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **There's little point** arguing about whether Jon Pertwee or Mackenzie Crook's *Worzel Gummidge* is the best. It depends what you're in the mood for: a charmingly bucolic, folk tale-suffused fairy tale about a living scarecrow or an in-your-face, vaudevillian slapstick caper about a living scarecrow. They each do it their way, brilliantly.

The Pertwee series features a list of British comedy greats at the top of their game, taking physical comedy and ridiculous word play to another level, with cinematic production values almost unheard of on TV at the time, let alone kids' TV. All four original series have been given the remastering treatment for this Complete Restored Edition, and the resulting picture and sound quality is stunning. This series has never looked better, and (diversity issues aside) has aged remarkably well.

Extras The number of extras is discombobulating – nearly four hours of the bloomin' things.

Some are all new, including a piece with two of the child actors revisiting the farm location and reminiscing (15 minutes); a BFI Q&A (30 minutes) featuring Sean Pertwee, Jeremy Austin (John), Lorraine Chase (Dolly Clothes-Peg), Wayne Norman (Pickles) and Mike Berry (Mr Peters); another interview with Austin (six minutes); and very brief featurettes on the sound and image.

But the vast majority of material is fascinating archive footage. Well, mostly fascinating. We're not sure even the most devoted Worzel fan will sit through all 17 minutes of birds-in-fields stock footage, but hey, that's how completist this is.

There are idents, trailers and continuity announcements galore; photo galleries for each series, including promotional booklets; and two unused songs from the Christmas special (not itself included). Outtakes are thin on the ground (just two clips) but there's some never-used audio dubbing from series three, and four minutes of sound effects specially created for the series. You even get a 15-minute audiobook, read by Jon Pertwee, of the novelisation of an unused script from the Irish-backed series briefly mooted after the ITV show was cancelled.

Jon Pertwee as Worzel: outstanding in his field.

> **“Features a list of British comedy greats at the top of their game”**

Dozens of cast interviews – from regional news, magazine shows and Saturday morning children's TV, often with the actors in character – are marvellous memory-joggers regarding how TV was made at the time. One has a female interviewer being fantastically rude to Aunt Sally; in another, a mischievous Worzel helps a boy to cheat on a phone-in quiz. Naughty.

Also charming are five rare promotional films – including a bizarre one of Aunt Sally attending a Christmas party at 11 Downing Street, where Chancellor Geoffrey Howe plays Father Christmas. You also get a double-sided poster and a booklet. They did old Worzel proud. **Dave Golder**

i The original dog who played Ratter was replaced after one series when his owners demanded too high a fee for him.

SLUMBERLAND

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | **PG** | **SVOD**

Director **Francis Lawrence**

Cast **Marlow Barkley, Jason Momoa, Chris O'Dowd, Weruche Opia**

NETFLIX **In 2003 Johnny Depp** slapped on Jack Sparrow's eyeliner for the first *Pirates* film and had more fun than any actor before or since. Or at least, that *was* the case until Jason Momoa donned a pair of curly horns for *Slumberland*. His dream-hopping outlaw, Flip, contains shades of Sparrow, but there's also something uniquely Momoa about him – wilder, yet kinder.

Adapted from Winsor McCay's comic strip *Little Nemo*, about a boy's adventures in his dreams, *Slumberland* gender-flips the lead and constructs a pleasingly emotional fantasy. Eleven-year-old Nemo (Marlow Barkley, superb) lives in a lighthouse with her dad, until he's tragically lost at sea. She's then packed off to live with her uncle (Chris O'Dowd) in the big city, but he's a useless parent ("Do you need a hug, or whatever?" he asks nervously, as Nemo mourns). Escaping into her dreams, Nemo meets the aforementioned – and utterly bonkers – Flip and they set out to find her father.

Slumberland's effects, set design and cinematography are gorgeous; the end credits alone are exquisite. The script's funny, too, with both Momoa and Dowd nailing its one-liners and witty running jokes. But it's Barkley's centred, likeable performance as a grieving child that gives this film a warmth which elevates it to something special. **Jayne Nelson**

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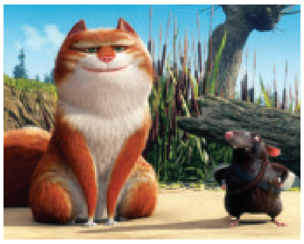


THE AMAZING MAURICE

★★★½☆

RELEASED 16 DECEMBER

2022 | **PG** | **VOD**

(also in selected cinemas)

Directors **Toby Genkel, Florian Westermann**

Cast **Hugh Laurie, Emilia Clarke, David Tennant, David Thewlis**

SKY CINEMA **Terry Pratchett's** *Discworld* novels are near-universally adored; adaptations of his works less so. This animated film adapts a kids' tale that, though technically set on the Disc, is really just a clever fairytale retelling.

Maurice (Hugh Laurie) is a talking cat who travels from town to village with a merry band of talking rats and Keith, their token human. They stage an invasion by the rats, Keith pretends to lure them away, and they collect cash from the grateful townsfolk.

It's simple but effective, until they get to Bad Blintz, where another group of ratcatchers have already set up shop. Mayor's daughter Malicia (Emilia Clarke), a teen who sees the whole world as a story filled with predictable plot devices, is keen to help – as soon as she can figure out Keith's orphan origin tale and secret power. He *must* have one, surely?

The voice cast is exceptional, particularly David Thewlis as the Rat King, and though Malicia's relentless optimism and meta storytelling do start to grate, it's good to see a female lead who's neither flawlessly strong nor cutely clumsy. Clever enough to keep adults happy, with just enough Discworld nods for fans, and a fun introduction for younger children. **Rhian Drinkwater**

"It's no good, I'm never going to fit all *that* in."

VAMPIRE CIRCUS

Doom At The Top

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1972 | **15** | **Blu-ray**

Director **Robert Young**

Cast **Adrienne Corri, Thorley Walters, John Moulder-Brown, Anthony Higgins**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Featuring no** Dracula, no Van Helsing and no riffing on Sheridan Le Fanu's "Carmilla", this Hammer horror rather stands alone in their filmography as a satisfyingly different take on vampire lore – one whose carnivalesque, fantastical elements seem to draw on European filmmakers such as Federico Fellini and Jean Cocteau.

Fifteen years ago, a Serbian village saw off decadent bloodsucker Count Mitterhaus. After a strange disease causes it to be isolated, a small troupe of circus performers roll up. Unbeknownst to the locals, they're set on revenge – and resurrection…

This isn't Christopher Lee's realm. However, neither is it the button-pushing softcore titillation offered by the likes of *Lust For A Vampire*; there are moments with subtler erotic charge here, most noticeably a sequence where a naked dancer, painted with tiger stripes, orgasmically writhes and thrashes about.

The film has its shonky moments (a chuckle-inducing panther attack; some woefully bad bite-mark make-up) and a few unanswered questions (are all the performers vampires?). But you can forgive such things, as despite their technical clumsiness, there's a poetry to sequences where tumblers transform, mid-air, into bats, or the local children are lured inside a magical mirror.

Extras Strawberry Media simply ports over the bonuses from Synapse's 2010 US release for this 50th anniversary edition. A solid retrospective doc (33 minutes), featuring contributions from Joe Dante and various Hammer mavens, covers all the bases.

A feature on the circus/carnival horror subgenre (15 minutes) rattles through the likes of *Freaks*. There's also a talking head on '70s magazine *The House Of Hammer* (10 minutes). Plus: a "motion comic" of the first few pages of *THOH*'s adaptation; galleries; trailer; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

i Screenwriter Judson Kinberg was the father of Simon, producer of the *X-Men* films and creator of *Star Wars Rebels*.

THE CAT AND THE CANARY/THE GHOST BREAKERS

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 5 DECEMBER

1939/1940 | **PG** | **Blu-ray**

Directors **Elliott Nugent/George Marshall**

Cast **Bob Hope, Paulette Goddard, Willie Best, Gale Sondergaard**

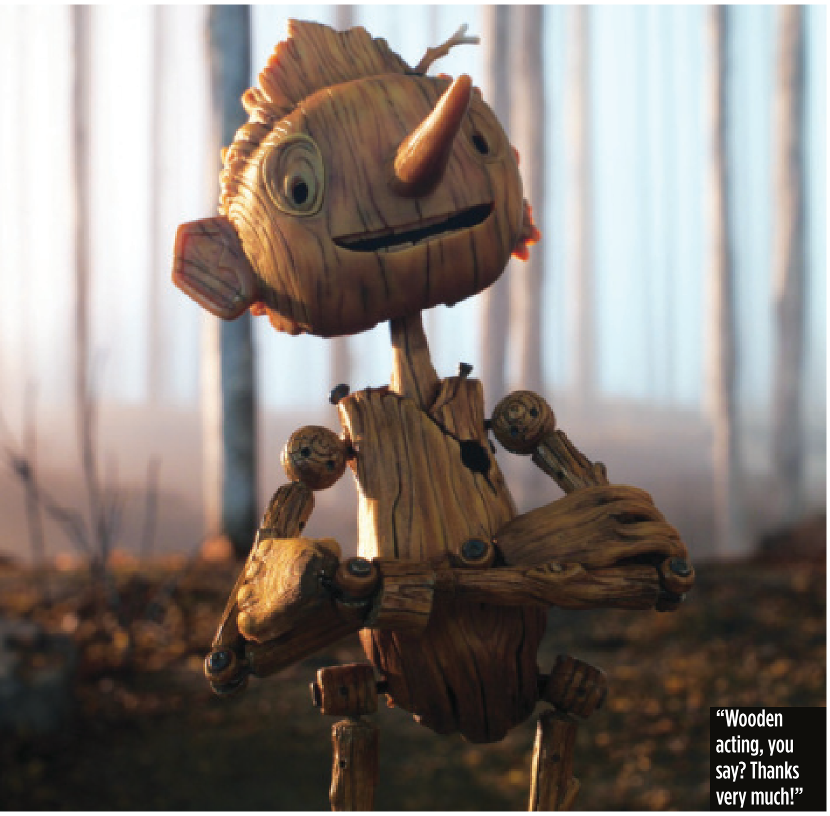
BLU-RAY DEBUT **Bob Hope fires** zingers at the supernatural in these horror capers, very much vehicles for his yellow-bellied, wiseguy persona.

The Cat And The Canary defines the Old Dark House genre, throwing Hope into a spooky Louisiana mansion whose secret passages crawl with corpses and killers. There's a genuine sense of Southern Gothic in the bayou backdrop and a delicious relish in every cliché, from hidden doors in bookshelves to roaming eyes in an oil portrait.

The Ghost Breakers attempts to catch the same magic, reuniting Hope with co-star Paulette Goddard. It only comes alive in the third act, a glorious, torchlit poke-around in a stunningly shot haunted castle.

All grin and chin, radio star Hope isn't yet a natural fit for the screen: not quite a hero, too sassy to be an everyman, a less than charming romantic lead. And there's more mugging than an alleyway in '70s New York.

Extras Audio commentaries on both from Kevin Lyons and Jonathan Rigby. Kim Newman provides fascinating historical context (20 minutes) while a 1949 radio adaptation of *The Ghost Breakers* (30 minutes) finds Hope on home turf, nimbly playing to a live audience. Plus: trailers; booklet. **Nick Setchfield**



"Wooden acting, you say? Thanks very much!"

PINOCCHIO

Puppet regime

★★★★☆

RELEASED 9 DECEMBER

2022 | **PG** | **SVOD**

Directors **Guillermo del Toro, Mark Gustafson**

Cast **Ewan McGregor, David Bradley, Gregory Mann, Tilda Swinton**

NETFLIX **"It's one nightmare after** another!" complains itinerant insect Sebastian J Cricket (Ewan McGregor) in the latest incarnation of Carlo Collodi's oft-filmed fairy tale. And it's true, the story of the wooden puppet magically given life takes on a distinctly ghoulish timbre this time around that may leave younger viewers spooked.

Fans of Guillermo del Toro's oeuvre, though, will embrace every surreally unearthly element in a title that starts with the son of Geppetto the woodcarver (David Bradley) perishing in a First World War church bombing, and proceeds to have the spindly marionette he constructs to replace him recruited by Mussolini's Blackshirts. A hyperactive monkey with screeches provided by Cate Blanchett and a luminous blue Death voiced by Tilda Swinton add more macabre to the mix, beautifully rendered in stop-motion animation that, thanks to co-director Mark Gustafson (*Fantastic Mr Fox*), always retains an endearingly hand-crafted tactility.

Only the songs let the side down, Alexandre Desplat's wan compositions adding little but length to a film that could have possibly done with being around 20 minutes shorter. **Neil Smith**

i An extended tracking shot showing Spazzatura the monkey cavorting through a carnival took an entire month to shoot.

EBOLA SYNDROME

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

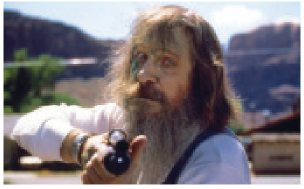
RELEASED OUT NOW!

1996 | **18** | **Blu-ray**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This "Category** III" Hong Kong horror makes the nasties look nice. Its truly repulsive protagonist is a murderer who flees to South Africa, contracts Ebola, then returns as a super-spreader. *And* he has a ponytail.

Expect small animal deaths, an *American Pie* moment with some raw meat, casual racism, corpses disposed of in burgers, and multiple rapes. Even those who find the humour in bad taste shock tactics may blench.

Extras Locations featurette; two commentaries; interview; poster; booklet. **Ian Berriman**



NIGHTMARE AT NOON

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 5 DECEMBER

1988 | **18** | **Blu-ray**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **This amusingly** risible action-horror mashes up *The Crazies*, the Western and Garth Marenghi, as something put in the water turns a Utah small town's residents violent – and Hulk-green... Luckily, the local population seems to be 30.

Bargain-bin VHS is its natural home. You're never more than five minutes from a vehicle exploding. However, the desert vistas featured latterly are genuinely stunning.

Extras Making Of; BTS footage; interviews. **Ian Berriman**

SPIRITED

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | **PG** | **SVOD**

APPLE TV+ **Before you throw** your arms up and scream "Not *another* adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*!", know that Sean Anders's musical comedy comes at it from a fresh angle.

Told from the perspective of the ghosts (specifically Will Ferrell's Ghost of Christmas Present, who finds himself being life-coached by Ryan Reynolds's miserly PR exec), the movie is big on laughs and heart. And even those wary of musicals will appreciate the knowing approach to those Busby Berkeley moments.

Steve O'Brien

LYNCH/OZ

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED 5 DECEMBER

2022 | **15** | **Blu-ray/DVD**

The most impressive thing about this documentary from director Alexandre O Philippe is its starry list of contributors. John Waters, Karyn Kusama and more contribute video essays on the much-discussed overlap between *The Wizard Of Oz* and the works of David Lynch.

Much of it is convincing while some theories will likely elicit a suspicious "Hmm...", but this is still a fascinating treatise on the intersection between inspiration and creation.

Extras Director's commentary. **Will Salmon**

THREE THOUSAND YEARS OF LONGING

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ☆☆☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD/download

Director **George Miller**

Cast **Tilda Swinton, Idris Elba**

Admirers of the likes of 2015's *Tale Of Tales* or Tarsem Singh's *The Fall* (2006) should relish George Miller's fantastical romance, a paean to storytelling far removed from the vehicular mayhem of the *Mad Max* movies.

Largely a two-hander, it sees Tilda Swinton's narratologist Alithea opening a glass bottle purchased from an Istanbul bazaar, releasing an ancient djinn (Idris Elba). At the academic's insistence, he regales her with tales of his previous "clients" – the Queen of Sheba; an Ottoman Empire slave; a female inventor – explaining the means by which he once again became trapped.

Adapted from AS Byatt's 1994 short story "The Djinn In The Nightingale's Eye", it's engaging on two fronts. Elba's djinn is surprisingly human – more than just a trickster – and his account is presented in colourful storybook fashion, with some strikingly ornate tableaux. And the question of what "heart's desire" the wary scholar will plump for provides suspense. The answer is unexpectedly sweet.

Alithea's academic thesis is that mythology has been rendered unnecessary by science. Miller's film confirms that we can still use a little magic from time to time.

Extras Not a sausage.

Ian Berriman

"Hey, OJ –" "Nope." "I wanted to –" "Nope."

NOPE

Shoot for the sky

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray (4K/standard)/DVD/download

Director **Jordan Peele**

Cast **Daniel Kaluuya, Keke Palmer, Steven Yeun, Michael Wincott**

***Close Encounters* morphs into** *Jaws* in Jordan Peele's latest, a UFO flick with a killer midpoint pivot, as horse trainer siblings OJ (Daniel Kaluuya) and Em (Keke Palmer) try to make a buck by capturing the saucer buzzing their ranch on camera.

Though it's a larger scale movie, riffing on a more mainstream genre, *Nope* ultimately proves to be just as offbeat as *Us*. Fortean showers of everyday objects, an ersatz Wild West attraction and flashbacks to a sitcom-set chimpanzee rampage make for a pretty strange brew. Then there's the self-contained nature of OJ, whose sentences are rarely longer than five words. Initially off-putting, his essential stillness has a solid logic behind it, and certainly feels original.

The plot doesn't bear thinking about (you have to keep repressing the question, "Why now, after six months?"). And Peele's underlying theme – the dangers inherent in our addiction to spectacle – doesn't really resonate. But performances are excellent across the board, the sound design – all reverberating growls, distant shrieks and slowed-down distortions – is a triumph, and it's perversely pleasing to know that $68 million was splashed on a film so fundamentally odd. In the words of one character: "Exquisitely stupid".

Extras A 56-minute Making Of captures shooting on the first day, the last, and numerous points in-between, providing plenty of interesting behind-the-scenes glimpses – and a little too much syrupy mutual appreciation. Of the five deleted scenes, the only significant one isn't really "deleted" at all: the chimp attack scene in its raw state, before CG supplanted ape imitator Terry Notary. Highlight of the gag reel: a horse interrupting a scene with a stream of piss so sustained it may leave you needing the bathroom yourself. **Ian Berriman**

i The script's working title was *Little Green Men* – a punning reference to dollar bills and "the monetisation of spectacle".

BODIES BODIES BODIES

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD

Directors **Halina Reijn**

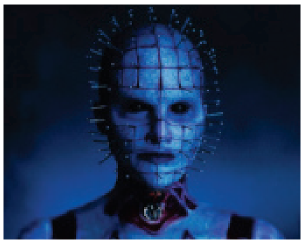
Cast **Amandla Stenberg, Maria Bakalova, Myha'la Herrold, Chase Sui Wonders**

The foibles of Gen Z (and plenty of older people too, in this age of smartphone addiction and metastasizing narcissism) are neatly skewered in this wry horror-comedy.

Set in an American mansion, it sees a bunch of old friends gathering to see out a hurricane by partying: snorting coke, downing shots, shooting TikToks, and playing the titular game (you may know it as Murder or Werewolf). When someone's found with their throat slit, the finger of suspicion points here and there, the corpses stacking up as calamity after calamity follows…

Director Halina Reijn and her cast skilfully balance a tone of jet-black absurdism with characters whose self-regarding witlessness seems infuriatingly plausible; Sarah DeLappe's script amusingly ticks off all the regurgitated buzzwords du jour – ally, triggering, ableism – en route to an audacious rug-pull. Wickedly good fun, and a useful reminder to power down your phone and fully engage IRL.

Extras Reijn's excellent solo commentary has useful insights into both her intentions and how she, a Dutch fortysomething, achieved authenticity (she asked her young cast for music playlists, fed things they said into the script, and allowed leeway for improvisation). Plus: two deleted scenes. **Ian Berriman**



HELLRAISER

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2022 | 18 | SVOD
Director **David Bruckner**
Cast **Odessa A'zion, Jamie Clayton, Brandon Flynn, Goran Višnjić**

PRIME VIDEO **Has any film** franchise suffered quite as much as *Hellraiser*? After a long string of diabolical low-budget sequels, this soft reboot (while intended as a fresh start, there's little here that contradicts the sequels) is a far classier affair – for better and worse.

Recovering addict Riley (Odessa A'zion) discovers a mysterious puzzle box. Shortly afterwards, her brother Matt (Brandon Flynn) disappears. Joining the dots between these two incidents, she investigates the mystery surrounding millionaire Roland Voight (Goran Višnjić) – which draws the attentions of the extra-dimensional Cenobites.

The film looks great, smartly updating the Cenobites without unnecessarily reinventing them. Jamie Clayton is excellent as the new Pinhead, every bit as elegant and intelligent as her predecessors, and perhaps even more intimidating. And while the last act descends into a generic monster movie runaround, Voight's house is a great setting – a mansion-cum-prison entombed in a structure like the Lament Configuration.

Still, you have to question a *Hellraiser* film that prioritises lore over sex. The best of these films are soaked in sleaze and gore, and while this one doesn't stint on the claret, it's disappointingly lacking in the kink department. It succeeds in dragging the series back to respectability, but it's all so damned *polite*. **Will Salmon**

"Yeah, I'd like to see McKellen pull off *this* role."

STAR TREK: PICARD Season Two

A disorderly Q

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
2022 | 15 | Blu-ray/DVD
Showrunners **Akiva Goldsman, Terry Matalas**
Cast **Sir Patrick Stewart, John de Lancie, Jeri Ryan, Brent Spiner**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The replicator** serves up a stew of *Trek* tropes and icons in *Picard*'s second season: Q, the Borg Queen, Guinan, time travel and a dystopian reflection of the final frontier we know and love. This time it's not the Mirror Universe but an alternate timeline, necessitating a mission to 21st century LA that riffs on *The Voyage Home* to the point of karaoke. The power of Gene Roddenberry's vision was always metaphorical – confronting our heroes with true life border camps, however well-intentioned, only defuses that power.

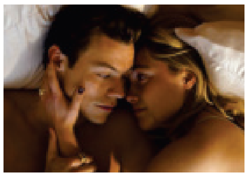
In spite of a strong, intriguing opening the season ends up spinning its wheels, redeemed in the final moments by an exchange between old pros Patrick Stewart and John de Lancie that's electric with 35 years of TV history.

+ Extras A solid selection, mostly decent-sized behind-the-scenes featurettes. A piece on the USS Stargazer (18 minutes) includes snatches of an internal video call between design team members. A piece on Picard's Chateau (15 minutes) has interesting insights into recreating old props and designing alien skulls. Propmaster Jeff Lombardi does a show-and-tell with his work (12 minutes); The Confederation weapons and gear are highlights. There's also a 12-minute piece on recreating the Borg Queen.

A 12-minute piece on Q has touching footage from when John de Lancie wrapped. Skippable: "Picard Passages" (25 minutes), in which the cast yammer on about character relationships. Plus: nine minutes of deleted scenes; a gag reel. **Nick Setchfield/Ian Berriman**

i Look out for a clock in the background of the Stargazer's viewing room – it was used in the original *TNG* Stargazer set.

(ROUND UP)



It seems like five minutes since **DON'T WORRY DARLING** (5 December, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD/download) was in cinemas. Harry Styles is half of a couple living in a suspiciously idyllic '50s residential community where all the chaps are working on a secret project. We said: "The big problem is the final act reveal. Filching ideas from other movies, there's a good chance you will have seen this before." Negligible extras: just a Making Of and a deleted scene. Hollywood effects great Phil Tippett began working on **MAD GOD** (5 December, Blu-ray/DVD/download) in 1987, then shelved it for 20 years. Now it's been completed. Told mostly via stop-motion, it follows a gas-masked figure through a hellish underworld. We said: "Tippett's nightmarish tableaux, largely assembled from junk, bristle with detail… An engrossingly grotesque Grand Guignol spectacle." Eye-catching bonus: a commentary teaming Tippett with Guillermo del Toro. Horror sequel **ORPHAN: FIRST KILL** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) brings back Esther, a psycho with a glandular disorder masquerading as a 10-year-old, to worm her way into another unsuspecting family. We said: "Laboriously ensures every detail of the previous film is referenced at tedious length. Nothing here comes close to recapturing its gleeful mischief." Finally, new TV box sets include **DOOM PATROL SEASON THREE** (5 December, DVD), **HALO SEASON ONE** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), and **WESTWORLD SEASON FOUR** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD).

CITY OF LAST CHANCES

Tour guide required, apply within

★★★★☆

RELEASED 8 DECEMBER
502 pages | **Hardback/ebook**
Author **Adrian Tchaikovsky**
Publisher **Head Of Zeus**

Never an author lacking in a sense of scale and breadth of vision, Adrian Tchaikovsky crafts a world of such depth and complexity in *City Of Last Chances* that it threatens to overwhelm his characters.

The setting – and perhaps Tchaikovsky's protagonist – is Ilmar, a city still smarting from its defeat three years ago at the hands of the invading Palleseen army. The occupiers' self-appointed mission is to bring perfection to the world, whether the world wants it or not, and Ilmar is rife with disquiet.

University students dream of revolution, while those tired of the Palleseen's oppression may take their chances at escaping through the Anchorwood, a mystical grove where the full moon opens a portal to unknown, distant lands.

The Anchorwood represents one of the main themes of the tale, namely the clash between the unyielding rationalism of the Palleseens, and the untameable, mysterious nature of the magical forces at play in Ilmar. This manifests throughout the story in different forms. The Palleseens collect magical artefacts and extract their energy to power their army's weapons, transforming the mystical into the practical.

Yet the magic resists; Culvern, a senior Palleseen official, suffers under a curse bequeathed him by the deposed Duke of Ilmar, while one entire district of the city, the Reproach, has fallen into ruin under the influence of a malevolent spell that bewitches those who venture inside.

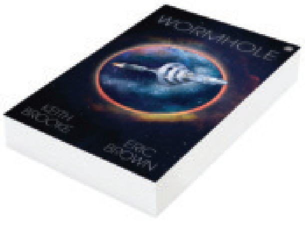
Tchaikovsky is a confident and talented worldbuilder, yet with such a sprawling cast of characters and a wealth of complicated international relations and history all feeding into the tale, it's hard to identify whose story this really is. Prominent players include Yasnic, the last priest of a fading religion; Ruslav, an underworld enforcer; Lemya, an idealistic student; Ivarn, a college professor with a lofty opinion of himself; and Hellgram, a former soldier who arrived through the Anchorwood and is searching for his lost wife. But that's just a sample of the perspectives through which events are recounted – there are many others, with more introduced even in the later stages.

Ruslav certainly has a compelling arc, from violent thug to reluctant pacifist via an unexpected infatuation that lends him surprising depth, and Yasnic presents an intriguing dilemma, bound to a capricious god who refuses to bend his rules even the slightest, despite his religion teetering on extinction. However, among these many personalities and plotlines, the heart of the story seems to be the city itself. The drama centres around the battle for control of Ilmar and the power to decide its identity, expressed in the desire of the residents to hold onto their traditions under the rule of their colonisers.

As complex and multifaceted as the plot's structure may be, Tchaikovsky's prose is as vigorous as ever. Battle scenes set the blood pumping and he has a gift for horror that seeps into the story. There's a tangible sense of dread in the scenes set within the Reproach, as the characters struggle against the siren-like lure of the madness that calls to those foolish or desperate enough to venture within. This manifests as a madcap urge to dance that, once tasted, becomes an undercurrent of disquiet that pulses uneasily through those touched by it.

The author paints a vivid, detailed backdrop and populates it with colourful personalities and elaborate religious, political and economic systems, but the book does feel like it could use a single, primary point of view to guide the reader. Still, making a location the main character is a considerable challenge and it's testament to Tchaikovsky skill that he can make it work. **David West**

Also just released: *Children Of Memory*, the third book in Tchaikovsky's Children Of Time series. He's a busy little beaver.



WORMHOLE

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
400 pages | **Paperback/ebook**
Authors **Keith Brooke, Eric Brown**
Publisher **Angry Robot**

Frequent collaborators Keith Brooke and Eric Brown are back with a standalone sci-fi yarn that combines a good old-fashioned Earth-based detective noir investigation with a parallel plot about humanity's first voyage to colonise a planet five light years away. What links the two? Well, we don't want to drop any spoilers, but there *might* be a clue in the title.

The ageing detective at the novel's core, Gordon Kemp, works on cold cases, but his latest assignment is colder than most: the murder of a rich industrialist 80 years ago. New evidence suggests the murderer was onboard a ship that was supposed to take Earth's first colonists to the planet Mu Arae – which exploded shortly after take-off. Except it didn't, its survival kept secret for political reasons. Now the colonists have arrived, Kemp learns there's a way that he can interrogate the suspect personally.

Full of dubious coincidences, suspiciously handy clues and characters led by plot rather than the other way round, *Wormhole* is nevertheless an enjoyable enough remix of a bunch of sci-fi staples into a conspiracy-fuelled whodunnit

There are surprises along the way, but the pace is occasionally scuppered by endless chases across, through and under the alien landscape – do not attempt a drinking game based on every time the word "tunnel" is mentioned unless you hate your liver... **Dave Golder**

DR WHO & THE DALEKS: THE OFFICIAL STORY OF THE FILMS

★★★★☆

RELEASED 12 DECEMBER
160 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **John Walsh**
Publisher **Titan Books**

What's been (thanks to 4K restorations) a revival year for the '60s *Doctor Who* movies starring Peter Cushing ends with this impressively comprehensive book.

Weaving a captivating story about them is tricky. They've been well-documented, and living participants either remember nothing or can only contribute well-rehearsed anecdotes. So while key players have been interviewed, knowledgeable fans wil find little fresh info; an inconsistent approach to citations can also make it hard to tell new quotes from old. One nit-pick, also: *Dr Who & The Daleks* definitely *wasn't* only the second British TV show to transfer to the big screen – we can think of at least five more.

The chief selling point is the imagery. The author was able to raid the StudioCanal archives, and the resulting visual feast should prompt oohs and aahs from even the most jaded fan; many stills are unfamiliar, some never previously published. He also wisely contacted various other sources, like ephemera site The Space Museum and the family of art director Bill Constable. The inclusion of two surviving concept paintings by the latter – one a delightful TARDIS interior – is a real coup. **Ian Berriman**

THE RED SCHOLAR'S WAKE

Shipping – literally...

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
336 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Aliette de Bodard**
Publisher **Gollancz**

Can a relationship between a woman and a spaceship technically be called lesbian erotica, even if the ship chooses to self-identify as a female avatar? To be honest, we doubt fans of sapphic sci-fi romances are going to quibble too much about the finer details of labelling when it comes to *The Red Scholar's Wake*. Though it does bring a whole new meaning to spaceship porn...

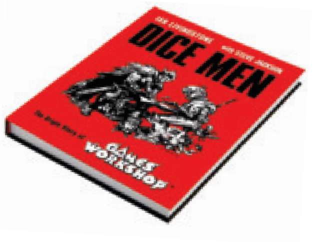
The book is a shameless "lesbian pirates vs the corrupt empire" space opera, which takes place in a matriarchal far-future where men feature about as prominently in the action as women did in '50s sci-fi flicks. Set against a backdrop of political intrigue, it's the story of a tech-savvy scavenger, Xich Si, who's captured by pirates of the Red Banner fleet. Expecting death or a life of servitude, she's surprised instead to receive a marriage proposal from the AI ship she's being held on. It's a marriage of political convenience though, as the ship, Rice Fish, is the recently widowed wife of the Red Banner's former leader, the Red Scholar.

The reasons for Rice Fish's proposal are a tad contrived to say the least, and you won't be surprised to learn that the relationship soon becomes something deeper than a cover story. But from that flimsy set-up, Aliette de Bodard spins an engaging romance and conspiracy tale, full of well-drawn characters.

As science fiction it's on shakier ground, with a haphazard approach to worldbuilding. You learn what characters are wearing but the details of how this empire might function on a socio-political level are vague, while in terms of culture this is basically Vietnam in space – complete with names that use every diacritic going.

Ultimately, it's a romantic fairy tale in an outlandish setting, but one told with a quirky charm and exotic kinkiness. **Dave Golder**

Aliette de Bodard is a keen amateur cook, with over 50 recipes from all over the world on her site aliettedebodard.com.



DICE MEN

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
267 pages | Hardback
Authors **Ian Livingstone, Steve Jackson**
Publisher **Unbound**

Today, Games Workshop – you know, the *Warhammer* people – is worth more than £2 billion. It's the foremost wargames and miniatures company in the world. Its origins in 1975, however, were far from grandiose.

This brief and breezy history (subtitled *The Origin Story Of Games Workshop*) charts the beginning of the company and the impact it had on two of its three founders, Sir Ian Livingstone and Steve Jackson (John Peake departs Stuart Sutcliffe-style early in the story). Livingstone doesn't dwell long on the personal aspects; he's more focused on a series of turning points leading to the duo's departure in 1991.

The nascent Games Workshop starts life with backgammon sets made in a shared flat on London's Bolingbroke Road, quickly becomes the European distributor for a new game called *Dungeons & Dragons*, and then expands into producing its own miniatures.

The GW described here is a dwarf (or Duardin) compared to the titan (or, er, Titan) we now know, and fans eager to find out how, say, the Space Marines were developed will be left wanting. Instead, this is a nostalgic look back at the duo's years spent living in a van and working out of their tiny first shop. It's enjoyable stuff with a strong visual component, thanks to scans of newsletters, photos and artwork. **Will Salmon**

RAYGUNS & ROCKETSHIPS

Pulp Fiction

SFX Loves ★★★★★

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

464 pages | **Hardback**

Editor **Rian Hughes**

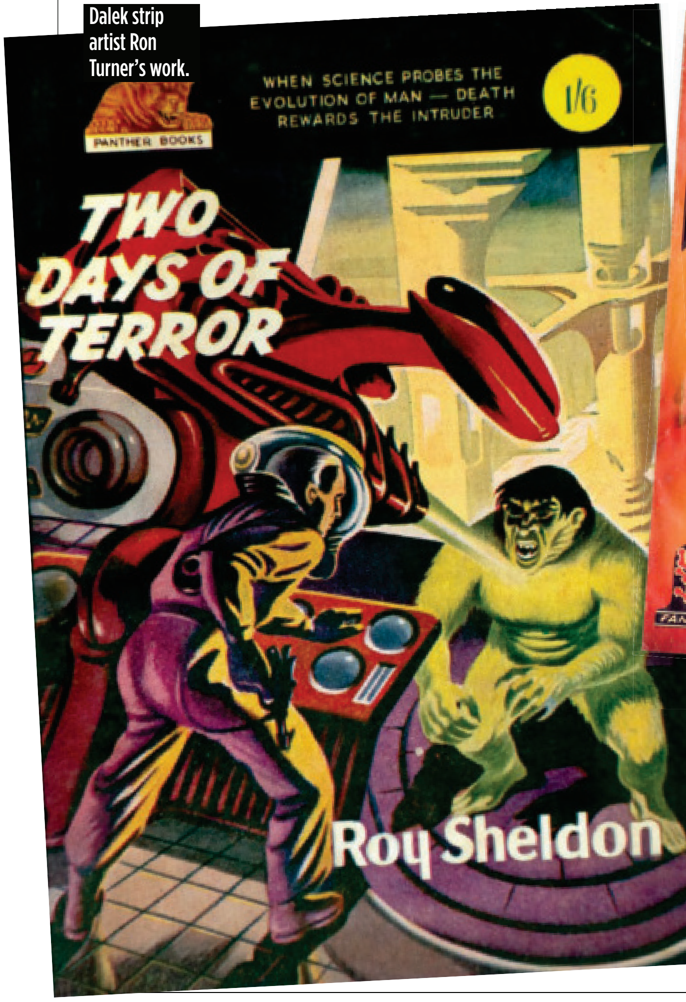
Publisher **Korero Press**

There can't be an *SFX* reader who hasn't considered purchasing some luridly illustrated sci-fi pulp, knowing they'll never read it. Rian Hughes's book offers a wallet-saving way to acquire a vast collection. It presents over 2,000 cover images for post-war British sci-fi novels. A few are original art. Most are scans, often complete with folds and grime. You can almost smell the mustiness.

Introductory essays provide industry context, and convey Hughes's fannish enthusiasm. Focused on the period from 1950-1970, it's arranged by publisher. In the latter stages, more respectable imprints with classier, more abstract covers emerge. But they're outnumbered by the hackwork churned out by the likes of R Lionel Fanthorpe. Stilt-legged frogs loom; Ronald Reagan is clearly a photographic reference; Isaac Asimov's name is spelt "Isacc".

After a while, you can identify the prolific artists. Gordon C Davies's freakish aliens recall children's drawings. Henry Fox feels like an ancestor to *Evil Dead* poster artist Graham Humphreys. And *Doctor Who* fans will be thrilled to spot the dramatically composed work of Ron Turner, illustrator of *TV Century 21*'s Dalek strips. It's a delight, one which turns the spoils from countless hours of hunched rifling into an afternoon's leisurely browsing. **Ian Berriman**

i Over the course of three years, R Lionel Fanthorpe wrote 89 novels for Badger Books – that's about one every 12 days.


WHEN SCIENCE PROBES THE EVOLUTION OF MAN — DEATH REWARDS THE INTRUDER
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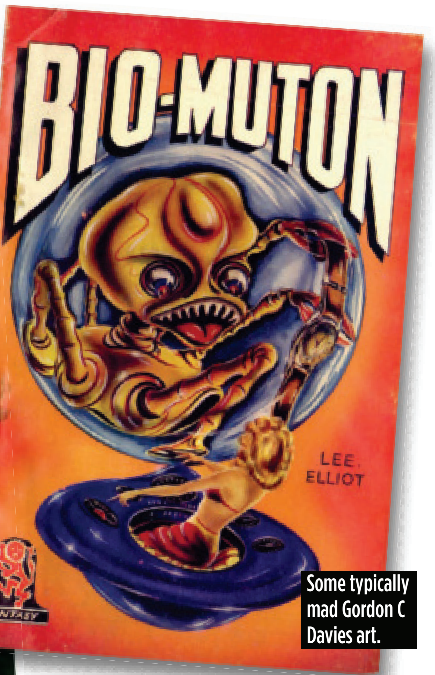
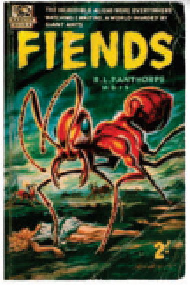
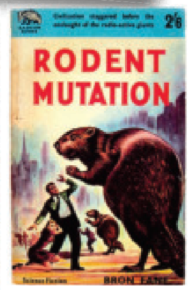
PANTHER BOOKS
TWO DAYS OF TERROR
Roy Sheldon

Dalek strip artist Ron Turner's work.



Some typically mad Gordon C Davies art.





BULLET TIME

A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS

S.H.A.D.O.
TECHNICAL OPERATIONS MANUAL

SHADO TECHNICAL OPERATIONS MANUAL

RELEASED OUT NOW!

208 pages | **Hardback**

Authors **Chris Thompson, Andrew Clements**

Publisher **Anderson Entertainment**

- After 2021's *Space: 1999*-themed Moonbase Alpha manual, here's another "guide for personnel", based on *UFO*.
- Split into sections on SHADO HQ, Moonbase, vehicles, equipment/uniforms, key personnel, the aliens and counter-alien operations.
- Features lovingly modelled interiors of control rooms, cockpits and so on, plus side-on/frontal view/from above blueprints.
- Includes gorgeous art of, say, a Skyfighter bursting out of the ocean.
- Good luck having a wee – loos only seem to exist on Skydiver subs.
- Amusing rationales are given for things like the sub crews' fishnet vests (proximity to the reactor means it gets hot).
- Our favourite bit: a graphic showing the relative sizes of all of SHADO's vehicles. Neat!

THE SHADO MOBILE
CONTROL ROOM

WHERE IT RAINS IN COLOUR

★★★½☆

RELEASED 6 DECEMBER
410 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Denise Crittendon**
Publisher **Angry Robot**

Afro-futurism as a cultural phenomenon may have begun in the '90s, but it has reached its apex more recently. Everything and everyone from Wakanda, Janelle Monae and the Metropolitan Museum have all explored the intersection of African culture and speculative technology.

In Denise Crittendon's sci-fi novel, she follows suit. Inspired by her time spent in Zimbabwe, she draws from the mythology of the Dogon tribe in Mali and creates an Afro-futuristic utopia called Swazembi. Diving into the intricacies of this colourful world but staying rooted in the continent's idiosyncrasies is the book's greatest strength; Crittendon luxuriates in the exquisite imagery of the seas, caverns and shimmering skin tones.

Where the book loses some of its lustre is in the mechanics of the plot, which centres on the privileged Lileala, who's given the title of "Rare Indigo" by her community. However, a band of ne'er-do-wells set her in their sights and curse her with a disease that makes her skin lose its otherworldly glow. As her body becomes covered in grotesque scar tissue, Lileala begins to hear voices and flees her home in search of answers.

The allegories are solid yet familiar and it ends up in well-worn territory. But the gorgeous afro-futurist aesthetic alone is worth the price of admission. **Leila Latif**

BLOOD ON SATAN'S CLAW

★★★½☆

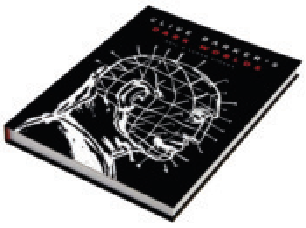
RELEASED OUT NOW!
211 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Robert Wynne-Simmons**
Publisher **Unbound**

In Piers Haggard's 1971 movie, 18th century villagers grow patches of hairy "devil's skin" after a strange skull is ploughed up in a field, with children murdering their classmates to honour Behemoth. Nowadays it's considered a foundational work of folk horror. Fifty-one years later, screenwriter Robert Wynne-Simmons has finally got around to novelising it.

While the film was an exercise in exploitation, the author tries something slightly more high-minded here, not dwelling on the more unseemly moments (like the gang rape/murder of Wendy Padbury's Cathy), and investing key characters with plenty of interior life. Anthony Ainley's Reverend Fallowfield particularly benefits, becoming a more sympathetic figure.

Wynne-Simmons also peppers new incident here and there (such as attempts to pull down a standing stone) and applies the odd (furry) patch: for example, providing a proper explanation for the oversized sword wielded in the climactic battle. While the result isn't a classic of the genre, it's sure to please fans, and substantial enough to stand on its own.

Further incentive to buy comes in the form of six attractive, faux-antiquarian lino-cuts by Richard Wells, whose work you may have seen in the likes of *Dracula* and *In The Earth*. **Ian Berriman**



CLIVE BARKER'S DARK WORLDS

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
352 pages | Hardback/ebook
Authors **Phil Stokes, Sarah Stokes**
Publisher **Abrams/Cernunnos**

There's arguably no one better placed to pen an overview of the creative life of Clive Barker than Phil and Sarah Stokes. Since launching the fan website Revelations in 1998 they've become good friends with the writer/director/artist, and are now the guardians of his archive.

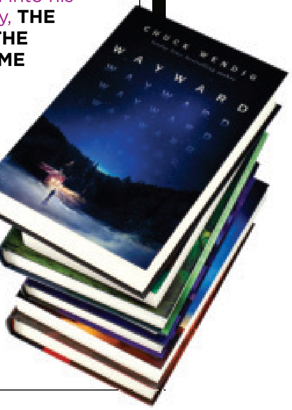
Mind you, you could also make the case that the expert sometimes assumes too much knowledge on their audience's part, or is reluctant to exclude data that might be better left out in favour of readability. Both charges can be levelled here from time to time. Do we really need the cover flap blurb of every novel, and the press kit synopsis of every film? For a book that's presented in a coffee table format, *Dark Worlds* is surprisingly dense.

Still, there's no denying the Stokes' level of access, or the comprehensiveness of their approach. Over the course of 65 short chapters, every last creative endeavour to bear Barker's bloody fingerprints is detailed: poems and paintings, erotica and exhibitions, videogames and graphic novels.

And while one might have hoped for more, there are some interesting visual treasures here, especially early on: handwritten manuscript pages; poster designs for '70s plays; stills from the making of his early shorts. If you're Barker mad, they have such sights to show you... **Ian Berriman**

ALSO OUT

As ever, there's plenty more books we couldn't quite squeeze in. Rebecca Roanhorse's dark fantasy **TREAD OF ANGELS** (out now, Solaris) centres on two "Fallen" sisters (descendants of demonkind) in a mining town. When Mariel is accused of murdering one of the ruling Archangels, Celeste sets out to prove her innocence. We rather dug Chuck Wendig's *Wanderers* – a post-apocalyptic tale in which a growing group of "sleepwalkers" wends its way across the United States – calling it "reminiscent of the likes of Stephen King and Robert McCammon at their '80s peaks". His equally chunky follow-up **WAYWARD** (out now, Del Rey) sees the now-woken sleepwalkers and the "shepherds" who protected them striving to rebuild the world. Would you prefer DC films if there weren't so many pesky moving images? Then **THE BATMAN: THE OFFICIAL SCRIPT BOOK** and **JOKER: THE OFFICIAL SCRIPT BOOK** (out now, Titan) are for you. Yep, it's the screenplays, illustrated with stills. *SFX*'s very own American correspondent Tara Bennett is behind **THE ART OF AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER** (DK, 16 December), a behind-the-scenes look at James Cameron's latest, crammed with concept art and creature designs, so it's probably one of the greatest books ever published. (Quietly slips a crisp $50 bill into his pocket). Finally, **THE ORIGINS OF THE WHEEL OF TIME** (out now, Tor) explores the inspirations behind Robert Jordan's series, drawing on interviews and a study of his unpublished notes.



THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Aliette de Bodard

The French-American novelist writes to the sound of seagulls

CHLOE VOLLMER-LO

What is your daily writing routine like?
◗ Very chaotic! I have two young kids so I basically squeeze in the writing when I can.

Describe the room in which you typically write.
◗ I write in my dining room: after we've cleared the table post-meal, I move my laptop onto the table, grab the couple of pen pots that hold all my fountain pens, get a notebook, and settle down to write.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?
◗ Absolutely! I like instrumentals or songs with beautiful voices and lyrics (Bat For Lashes, India Arie, Vienna Teng). I also use mynoise.net, which generates background noises that range from the sound of the sea to soft piano music. My favourite piece for writing is a sea from the cliffs and seagulls arrangement that reminds me of the Mediterranean in summer.

How do you deal with writers' block/the urge to procrastinate?
◗ A number of ways: by having a ritual in place (I always set the desk space with my laptop and accessories, and always brew a tea, which lets my mind get into the writing space); I tell myself to write three sentences (a tip I got from Mary Robinette Kowal, as it's an easy, attainable goal that leaves open the possibility to write further) or to write for five minutes; I log my daily word count in order to keep my motivation up.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?
◗ It was probably *The Red Scholar's Wake*, during the writing of which I managed to combine a pandemic, two lockdowns and a divorce. It was a challenge and a half to get back into the habit of writing after so many changes.

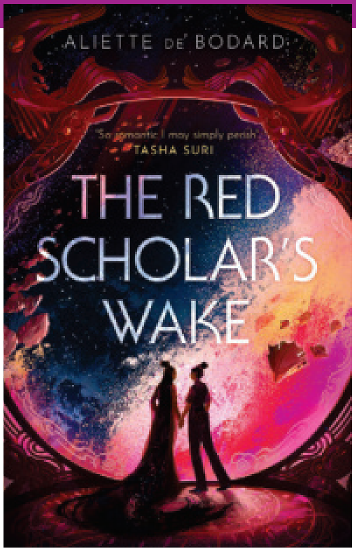
Do you have any writing "bad habits" that you have to keep in check?
◗ My use of the em-dash and the semicolon! I need to do a specific pass in order to root them out.

> "I combined a pandemic, two lockdowns and a divorce"

Were you a keen reader when you were a child?
◗ I was the kid who came out of the library every week with a pile of books, half of which were finished by the following morning (I'd wake up at 6.00am just so I could read). I loved Patricia McKillip's *The Book Of Atrix Wolfe*, the *Thorgal* comics by Rosiński and Van Hamme, Terry Pratchett's Discworld books, Alexandre Dumas's *The Count Of Monte Cristo*, the Sherlock Holmes and Arsène Lupin books...

Natasha Khan, aka Bat For Lashes: a favourite.

DAVID WOLFF-PATRICK/GETTY



Which SF/fantasy book published in the last year has most impressed you?
◗ I really loved T Kingfisher's *Nettle and Bone*. I have a weakness for fairy tale retellings, and this one is absolutely stellar, creepy and dark with just the right amount of whimsy and humour to it.

What's the main misconception people have about authors?
◗ That you're very rich. I wish I was! But really being an author is not that profitable unless you're several orders of magnitude more successful than I've been.

What's the best piece of writing advice you've received or read?
◗ If you want to break the rules, figure out why they exist, and then feel free to break them good and hard. ●

The Red Scholar's Wake is out now, published by Gollancz.

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First Read

AN EXTRACT FROM A NEW BOOK

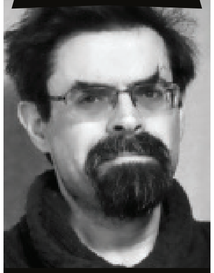
City Of Last Chances

by Adrian Tchaikovsky

ADRIAN TCHAIKOVSKY RETURNS TO FANTASY WITH A PORTRAIT OF A CITY UNDER OCCUPATION AND ON THE VERGE OF REVOLUTION

There has always been a darkness to Ilmar. The city chafes under the heavy hand of the Palleseen occupation, the chokehold of its criminal underworld, the weight of its wretched poor and the burden of its ancient curse.

The Author



→ Adrian Tchaikovsky was born in Lincolnshire before heading off to Reading to study psychology and zoology. He subsequently ended up in law and has worked as a legal executive in both Reading and Leeds, where he now lives. Married, he is a keen live role-player and occasional amateur actor and has trained in stage-fighting. He's the author of *Children Of Time*, the winner of the 30th Anniversary Arthur C Clarke Award, and the *Sunday Times* bestseller *Shards Of Earth*.

That morning, God was complaining again. Yasnic lay crunched up in bed, knees almost to his chin and his feet twined together. Trying to tell from the way the light filtered in through the filthy window whether the frost was just on the outside, or on the inside again. He could have put a hand out to touch the panes and check. He could have put a foot out and kicked out at God. Or the far wall. It was, he decided, a blessing. A small room held his body heat longer. If he'd been able to afford anything larger, then he'd have needed a hearth and to buy wood or coal, or even magical tablethi, to heat the place.

"It's cold," God said. "It's so cold." The divine presence was curled up on His shelf like an emaciated cat, and about the same size. He had shrunk since the night before, and perhaps that, too, was a blessing. Sometimes Yasnic could do with a little less God in his life, and here he was this morning, and God was smaller by at least a quarter. He gave thanks, his knee-jerk reaction ingrained from long years of good upbringing from Kosha, the previous priest of God. Back when Ilmar had been a more tolerant place, and old Kosha and Yasnic and God had lived in three rooms above a tanner's and had meat at least once a twelveday.

Not a twelveday, he reminded himself. The School of Correct Exchange was levying fines and making arrests for people using the old calendar, he'd heard. He had to start thinking in terms of a seven-day week, except then he couldn't look back on the way things had been and quantify the time properly. How often had they had meat, back when he'd been a boy learning at Kosha's knee? What was seven into twelve or twelve into seven or however it might work? His mathematics weren't good enough to work it out. And so, obscurely, it felt as though a swathe of his memories was locked away by the new ordnances. Also, he'd just given thanks to God that he had less God in his life, and God, the recipient of those thanks, was right there and staring at him accusingly.

"I need a blanket," said God. "It's only the beginning of winter, and it's so cold."

God looked all skin and bones. He wore rags. It was only a season since Yasnic had sacrificed a good shirt to God, but the diminished state of the faith – meaning Yasnic – tended to mean anything God got His hands on didn't last. A blanket would go the same way.

"I only have one blanket," Yasnic told God.

"Get another one." God stared at His sole priest from His place on the shelf up by the low ceiling. His spidery hands were gripping the edge, His nose and wisps of beard projecting over them. His skin was wrinkled and greyish, hollowed until the shape of His bones could be seen quite clearly. "In the old days I had robes of fur and velvet, and my acolytes burned sandalwood—"

"Yes, yes, I know." Yasnic cut God off. "I only have this blanket." He lifted the threadbare covering and regretted it instantly, the chill of the morning taking up residence in a bed with room only for one. "I suppose I'm getting up now," he added pettily.

"Please," said God. Yasnic stopped halfway through forcing numb feet into his overtrousers. God looked in a bad way, he had to admit. It was easy just to think that God was being selfish. God had, after all, been very used to people doing what He said and giving Him all good things, back in the day. Back in a day long before Yasnic, last priest of God, had come along. Their religion had been dying for over a century, ever since the big Mahanic Temple had been raised. And yes, Mahanism had actively spoken against other religions, but more, they'd just... expanded to fill all the available faith. People went where the social capital was. And now, under the Occupation, there really

> "God had, after all, been very used to people doing what He said and giving Him all good things, back in the day"

were people purging religions. Making arrests for Incorrect Speech. *Just as well it's only me and God,* Yasnic thought. *Easier to go unnoticed.*

"Ask the woman," God said. "Ask her for another blanket. I'm cold."

"Mother Ellaime will not give us another blanket," Yasnic said. In fact, their landlady would more likely want to ask about last twelved—last week's rent. And that was another thing, of course. Since the Occupation, everything had to be paid sooner, because of the weeks. And he couldn't quite make the maths work, but it seemed he was paying more each day of the seven than he had each day of the twelve. And it wasn't as though being the sole surviving holy man of God actually brought in much. There were few perks and no regular take-home wage. And, under the Occupation, begging meant risking arrest for Incorrect Exchange.

"I'll see what I can do." Clothes on, he shambled out of the room and went down for tea. One thing Mother Ellaime did provide her boarders with was a constantly churning samovar by the fire, and both fire and tea were just about enough to set up Yasnic for a day's scrounging.

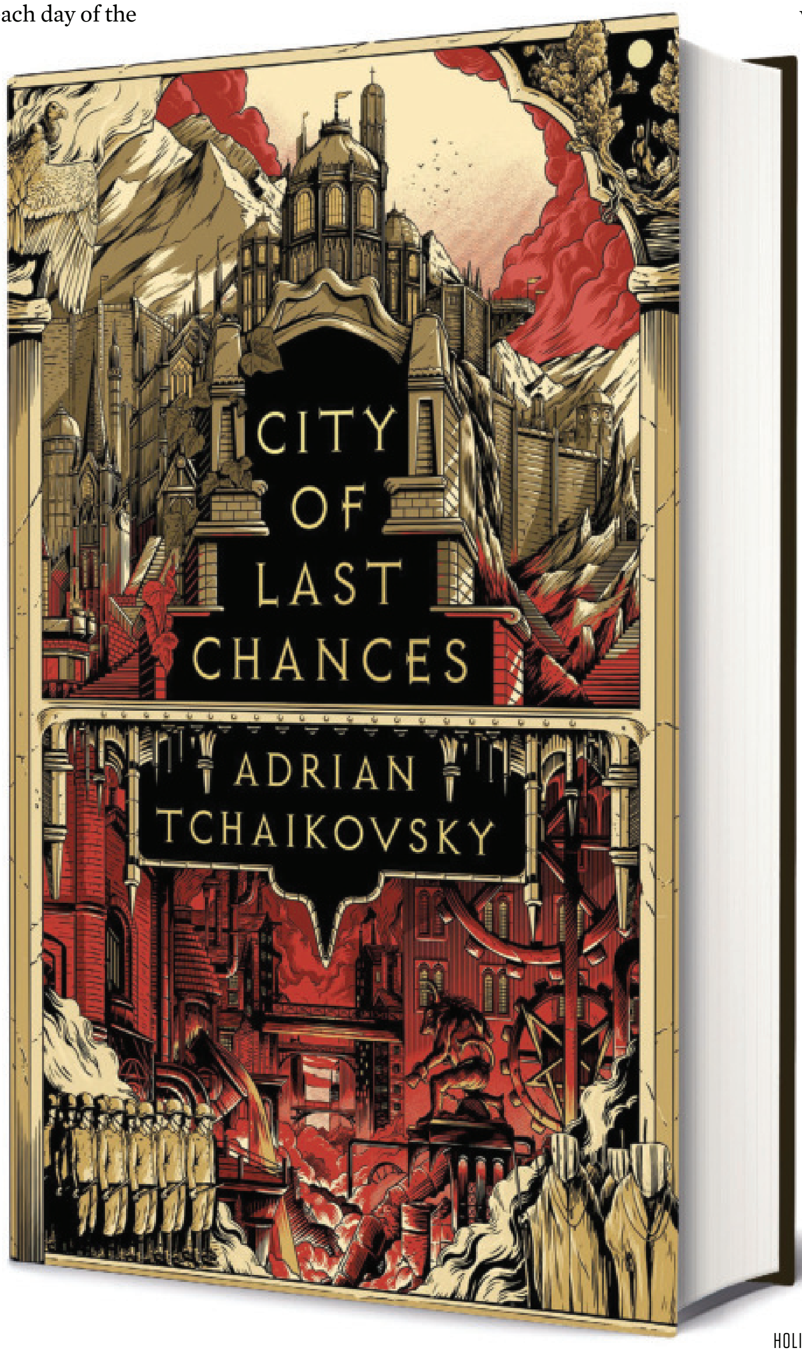
God hadn't been with him on the stairs but was sitting beside the samovar down in the common room. Yasnic took down a cup from its hook and filled it with dark green, steaming liquid. He wanted to avoid Mother Ellaime's notice as he jostled elbows with his fellow boarders to get space at the single table. God was there, though. God was hunched cross-legged on the tin plate Yasnic's neighbour had eaten porridge off.

"Ask her," God insisted.

"I won't do it," murmured Yasnic. His neighbour, the big man named Ruslav who never seemed to have a job but always seemed to have money, stared at him. He couldn't see God sitting in the remains of his porridge. He probably thought Yasnic wanted to lick his plate clean. Jealously, he pulled it closer to himself, making God scrabble for balance. Yasnic winced, aware that everyone was looking at him now, even the student girl who'd turned up a tw—two weeks ago, and whom he dreaded talking to. She was very clever, and Gownhall people loved to argue metaphysics. He was afraid he'd listen to her tortuous logic too much and then look around for God, only to find God wasn't there anymore. And he was afraid of what he might feel, if that were ever the case.

"Ask," God insisted peevishly. "I command it."

"Mother," Yasnic said. "I don't suppose I could beg another blanket from you?" Loud enough to carry to the old woman. Aware that his quiet words were expanding to fill the room. Feeling the student's judging eyes on him. Feeling ashamed. And it wasn't even a useful shame, the sort that earned you credit with God or, in this case, got you a blanket, because Mother Ellaime was already shaking her head. And if there was a little more money, there might be another blanket. And likely that would mean someone at the table, who had a little less money, would be missing a blanket, because it was a closed blanket economy here at Mother Ellaime's boarding house. And if it had just been Yasnic, he would have accepted the lack of a blanket and known that he was making someone else's life better, and tried to warm himself with that. But it was God, and God was old and petty and selfish, but God was also cold, and Yasnic had given himself into God's service. And so he begged Mother Ellaime, with the whole table listening archly to every word. With Ruslav, who probably had two blankets or even three, snickering in his ear. God was cold, and God didn't have anyone else. And it was all for nothing because there wasn't another blanket to be had, not without money he didn't possess.



Find out what happens next in City Of Last Chances. The ebook and UK hardback versions are out on 8 December, published by Head of Zeus. The US hardback is out on 2 May 2023.

CATWOMAN: LONELY CITY

Selina's final score

★★★★½

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **DC Black Label**
- Writer/artist **Cliff Chiang**

ISSUES 1-4 **Exploring potential** futures for Batman-related characters never seems to go out of style, and while we've had one recent look at a possible destiny for Selina Kyle in Tom King's *Batman/Catwoman* saga, the same concept gets a very different treatment in DC's latest Black Label miniseries.

Set 10 years after Batman's death, *Lonely City* follows a fiftysomething Catwoman as she's finally released from prison after a decade behind bars. Gotham is now a barely recognisable surveillance state, and Selina doesn't feel like she fits in any more – but she's also out to fulfil Bruce Wayne's mysterious dying wish. Doing this involves breaking into the locked-down and seemingly impenetrable Batcave, and it's with this development that *Lonely City* becomes a twisty and entertaining heist thriller.

Writer/artist Cliff Chiang (co-creator of *Paper Girls*) injects a bold sense of pace and tension across all four issues of the series, balancing snappy dialogue and strong characterisation with energetic action sequences as the stakes escalate. He also has an obvious love of heist-related hijinks, showcasing a number of memorable set-pieces as Selina gradually gets back into her Catwoman groove.

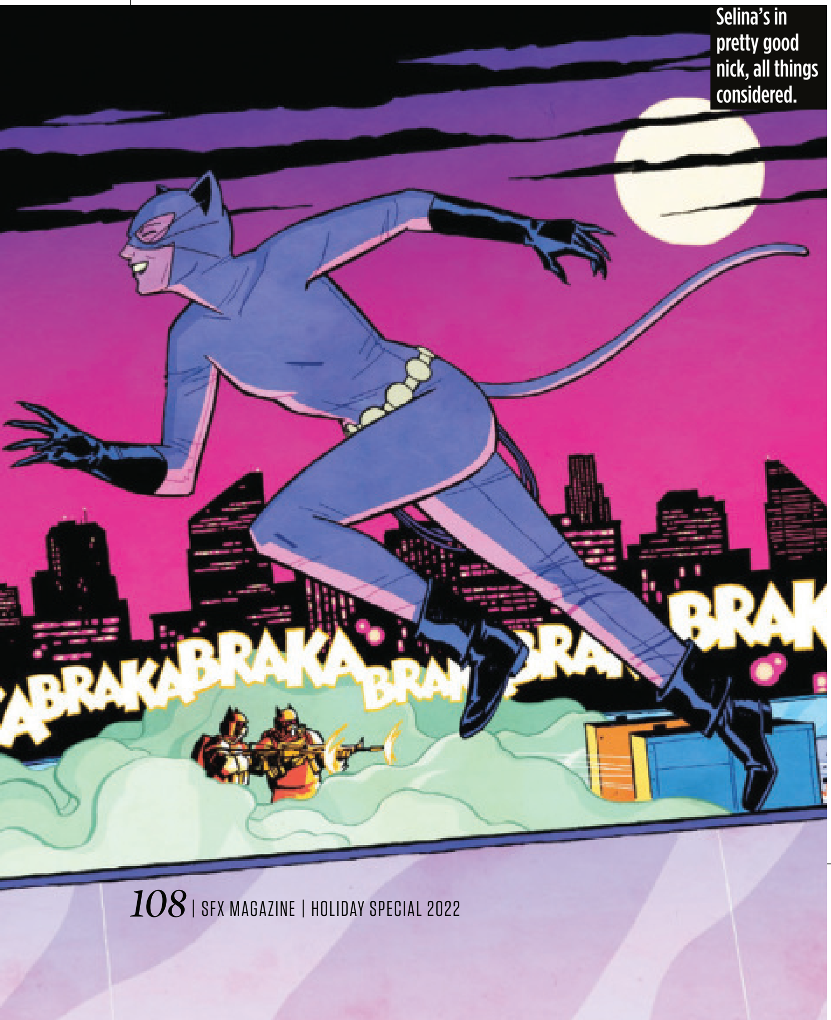
However, what's most satisfying about *Lonely City* is its mature, elegiac tone. There are undeniable echoes of *The Dark Knight Returns* here, but Chiang's story strips away the myth and instead explores Selina as a middle-aged woman coming to terms with her mortality and her place in the world. There's a surprising amount of depth to the characterisation, along with some unexpected twists (especially when ex-Riddler Edward Nygma joins Selina's team). It's a "one last heist" story with potentially fatal consequences for all, and Chiang makes the relationships between Selina and her friends charming and believable, while landing certain sequences with an emotional punch.

> **"There are undeniable echoes of The Dark Knight Returns here"**

On the art side, Chiang's work is as immaculate as ever, with him handling every element (including lettering), and utilising the oversized pages in a different manner to many Black Label titles. Instead of going for scale and lots of massive double-splash pages, he goes for density, packing every page with stylish compositions and creative panel layouts.

A couple of elements keep this from being a slam-dunk, especially some late appearances from supernatural DC characters that feel rather out of place, but otherwise this is a splendidly crafted story that shows how good a truly distinctive take on a superhero can be. **Saxon Bullock**

i Ignoring the usual procedures of the industry, Cliff Chiang does the lettering on his pages *before* he draws them.



Selina's in pretty good nick, all things considered.

THE DEATH OF SUPERMAN 30TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL

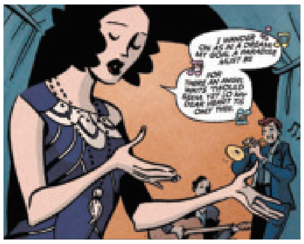
★★★★☆

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **DC Comics**
- Writers/artists **Various**

SPECIAL ISSUE **Reuniting the** original creative teams on this one-shot set in the continuity of a crossover from three decades ago could potentially make for a confusing read. However, Dan Jurgens neatly sidesteps this problem in his main feature, which takes place on the anniversary of Superman's demise at the hands of Doomsday (although crucially he never specifies exactly how many years have passed).

Consisting of Clark and Lois telling their young son Jon what happened on that fateful day, it has some meta fun with the unique nature of life and death in superhero comics, as well as nodding to how the media helped to turn "The Death Of Superman" into such a huge cultural phenomenon.

Of the three back-ups, the Guardian-focused "Standing Guard" is the best, with Roger Stern's snappy script neatly complementing Butch Guice's gritty artwork; Jerry Ordway and Tom Grummett's "Above And Beyond", focused on Ma and Pa Kent is slight but poignant; meanwhile, Louise Simonson and Jon Bogdanove's "Time" flashes back to John Henry Irons's early days. Commemorative issues of the next two arcs, "Funeral For A Friend" and "Reign Of The Superman", would be most welcome. **Stephen Jewell**



LOVE EVERLASTING

★★★★☆

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Image Comics**
- Writer **Tom King**
- Artist **Elsa Charretier**

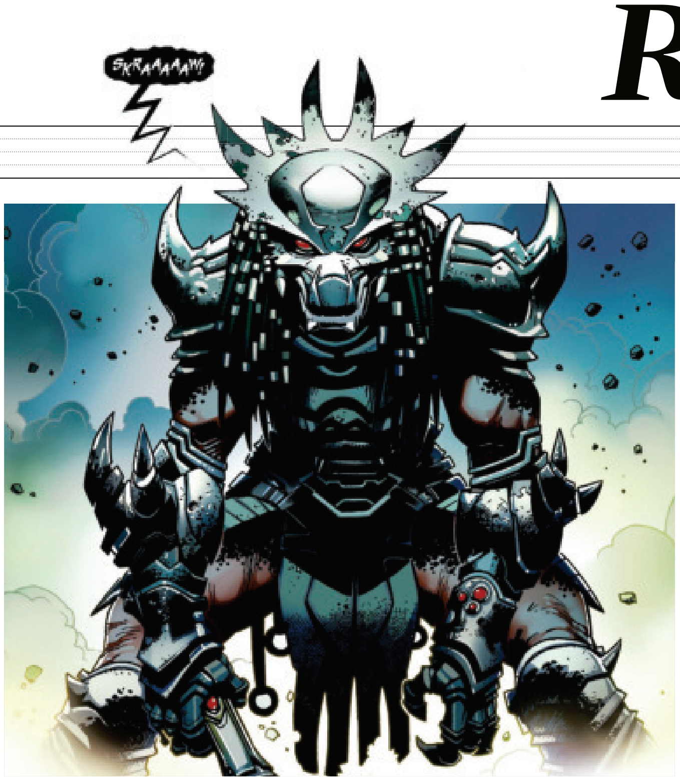
ISSUES 1-4 **Romance stories** used to be a *big* comics genre before largely falling out of fashion in the late ’60s. Now writer Tom King (*The Human Target*) and artist Elsa Charretier have revived them, with a leftfield twist.

Love Everlasting is the story of Joan – a woman who can’t help falling in love, and is tumbling endlessly through different melodramatic lives and realities. If Joan tries to escape her romantic destiny, a dark force will hunt her down. As she tries to understand what’s happening, the story also explores the gap between innocent ideals of love and the real thing.

Told almost entirely in the traditional, over-expressive style of vintage romance comics, the first four issues of this ongoing series play as a blend of dark fantasy and wicked satire. King’s slow-burn storytelling takes a little getting used to, but he pulls off some powerful moments and builds the mystery with plenty of style and precision.

He’s helped by Charretier’s gorgeous art, which pays homage to classic romance comics but still feels distinctly modern and energetic. It’s hard to tell where this psychedelic exploration of romance may ultimately be going, but with King and Charretier at the helm, it’s almost sure to be somewhere interesting.

Saxon Bullock



PREDATOR

Hunter killer

SFX Loves ★★★★★

★★★★★

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Publisher **Marvel Comics**
- Writer **Ed Brisson**
- Artist **Kev Walker**

ISSUES 1-4 **After recent small-**screen reboot *Prey* went back to the distant past, Marvel’s new monthly *Predator* series takes place in a near future where humanity has colonised the stars.

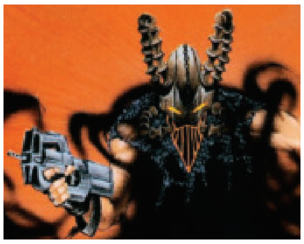
Getting around the standard problem of the alien trackers’ indecipherable language, initial six-parter “Day Of The Hunter” is told from the perspective of Theta, who is on a mission of vengeance after her parents were murdered by the Predators when she was a child. As indicated by the inaugural issue’s bravura, five-page opening sequence, which shows what’s apparently a pair of Predators battling – deftly depicted in near silence by Kev Walker – before the actually human victor removes her helmet, she has literally got under their skin and adopted many of their ways.

With Theta on her own for much of the time, Ed Brisson skilfully sets the scene through constant conversations with Sandy, her ramshackle ship’s onboard AI, with his brisk scripts avoiding any cumbersome info-dumps. Over the course of the first four issues, he gradually amps up the tension, constantly turning the tables as the hunter becomes the hunted, and keeping the Predators’ appearances to a minimum – at least until issue four’s thrilling confrontation.

Bringing a touch of *2000 AD* to the story’s hoverbikes, ice planets and space battles, the real star of the show is Walker’s excellent art, which combines fluid linework with some dynamic layouts, which are further enhanced by Frank D’Armata’s muted colours. With the interstellar locale perhaps sowing the seeds for an *Alien* crossover, let’s hope this isn’t the last we see of Theta. **Stephen Jewell**

> **“Over the first four issues, he gradually amps up the tension”**

i Out on 13 December: *Predator: The Original Years Omnibus*. It collects the first seven years of the Dark Horse comics.



FINN: ORIGINS

★★★☆☆

- **RELEASED 8 DECEMBER**
- Publisher **Rebellion**
- Writers **Pat Mills, Tony Skinner**
- Artists **Jim Elston, Kevin Wicks, Liam Sharp**

COLLECTION **Finn is one of the** more obscure characters from ’90s *2000 AD*. Created by Pat Mills, this witchy eco-warrior battles the forces of oppression, as represented by a cabal of sleazy businessmen (the Shining Ones) working with the alien “Newts”. Cue a lot of bloody violence, a smattering of sex and the usual pitch-black Mills humour.

Read today, this first of two volumes collecting the character’s complete run feels both timely and very of its time. Its preoccupations – environmental catastrophe, the arms trade, corrupt corporations and rampant misogyny – remain relevant, even if the comic’s crusty aesthetics have dated.

It’s a fairly shallow take on all of these themes, however. Finn himself is neither particularly likeable or interesting – despite an intriguing backstory and a cool look, he’s just another muscle-bound, slightly leery anti-hero. The pagan elements are engaging and a good fit for the eco-terrorism angle, but they’re only really addressed in the last of the three stories included here.

The art, too, is very variable. There are moments of vivid horror and beauty, but also more than a few panels that leave you wondering why everyone looks so greasy, or like they’ve been caked in fake tan. A strange and slightly awkward series, then, but one not without its charms. **Will Salmon**

GOTHAM KNIGHTS

Bat-street Boys (and girl)

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **PlayStation 5**

Also on **Xbox Series X|S, PC**

Publisher **Warner Bros Interactive**

VIDEOGAME **There's moody** lighting, plenty of punching bad guys, and lots of flying through the air with a grapple (cries of "Wheeee!" optional). However, this is very much *not* an *Arkham* game. In fact, the very first thing you should do before sitting down to play is to speed-run the grief process for Rocksteady's series until you reach acceptance.

Although not related to the upcoming TV show of the same name, the bones of the premise here are the same: Batman is dead, and it's up to a younger generation of heroes to watch over Gotham. That means Nightwing, Robin, Batgirl and Deadpool. Er, we mean Red Hood. While there are four characters, online story co-op only accommodates two players (the separate four-player mode is unavailable at time of writing). Despite a few disconnections during our time with the game, this generally works extremely well, being very solid technically (rare disconnects aside), with any discrepancies between the levels of the players smoothed out for a consistent experience.

The aforementioned character levelling, and accompanying crafting system, are easy to keep on top of – so easy that they're somewhat superfluous. There are other irritations – including a bland open world populated with repeating tasks, slightly awkward environment traversal and some poor communication of where to go next – but there's enough to save the experience.

Each of the four heroes is pleasingly distinct in abilities and feel, and each enjoys a combat system with a satisfying sense of weight (admittedly, some enemy types can break the flow by being difficult to pin down, or by attacking you from a distance). It works perfectly as a solo adventure if that's how you prefer to play and, alone or with a friend, the story – centring on the Court of Owls for the most part – demonstrates that Gotham can be used to tell a good tale even with Batman out of the picture.

Despite some rough edges, *Gotham Knights* offers a fun and compelling journey through the Batman universe – one with a clear reverence for the source material. **Luke Kemp**

i Dr Langstrom's features a Gray Ghost movie poster, release date 4/11/92 – TX of the character's The Animated Series debut.

"Hey Bats, it's Harley Qu – oh hang on, no it isn't."

Children of the Stones

CHILDREN OF THE STONES

★★★½☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

20 minutes | **Vinyl**

Label **Trunk Records**

SOUNDTRACK **Sidney Sager's** music from the classic 1977 TV serial about sinister goings-on in a village within a stone circle has long been high on the wishlists of folk horror fanatics. Finally, it's here. Rejoice!

Not that there's much of it. This one-sided LP is dominated by brief cues (about half of them 30 seconds or less), mostly variations on a theme. The Ambrosian Singers provide eerie vocalisations. Sometimes these are soothingly ethereal; when combined with panting and rising to a panic-inducing crescendo, they rather bring to mind a communal orgasm. On occasion, roiling kettle drums, gentle xylophone or a plucked guitar will intercede. Out of context, a track like "Matthew's Accident" really impresses; its smudged, looping vocals oddly evoke church bells, and feel experimental – even industrial.

A handsome package includes six postcards of woodcuts from the novelisation, and – joy of joys – a fold-out A2 poster reproducing a sinister painting from the series. It pains us to downgrade such a labour of love. Sadly, there's no ignoring the fact that (like Trunk's *The Wicker Man* LP) this release utilises a music and effects track. Even if no way of presenting the isolated score exists, and this is the best we can get, hearing a door closing or gravel crunching inescapably breaks the spell. **Ian Berriman**

SMILE CLUB

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

163 minutes | Podcast

Publisher **Red Ladder Theatre Company**

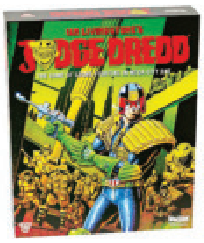
AUDIO DRAMA **Expectations of** women in modern society – to smile, be polite, be kind, be understanding, be pretty – are often minimised and are slowly being fought back against. But what if they were enforced?

This six-part audio series, spun out of a one-woman show, is a *Handmaid's Tale*-lite look at such a world, where women's rights are being slowly, *politely* rolled back, and women who've failed to live up to society's standards go to "Smile Club". Lisa Goodwin is sent there after assaulting a man harassing her. We follow her struggle against a Kafka-esque system of behaviour seminars and remedial streams.

Like many such dystopias, it's an incredibly depressing listen. Prepare to be bombarded with unfairness and injustice as perky Paula explains to the inmates how women should behave and dress in order to stay safe, or women are dragged off for any objection to their treatment. It's also too long, at almost three hours in total.

Lisa herself is an often unsympathetic character. This, though, is in part the series' strength: its creation of real, rounded people who present as shades of grey. And though the situations may seem too on-the-nose at times, a quick glance at any online comments section will remind you that there are many who still hold the attitudes shown here. A hopefully not *too* accurate look at our near-future.

Rhian Drinkwater



JUDGE DREDD

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

Two-six players

Publisher **Rebellion Unplugged**

BOARDGAME **There was a time** when Games Workshop made more than just *Warhammer* titles and miniatures… This fondly remembered *Judge Dredd* boardgame was first published in 1982 and has now been reissued (by Rebellion Unplugged rather than GW) to celebrate its 40th birthday. It's fast-paced and pleasingly straightforward without lacking in depth.

Players take on the role of street Judges and roam around the board (a handsome recreation of Mega-City One by Ian Gibson) uncovering crimes and busting Perps, represented by some classic comics art and ranging from the well-known (Judge Death, Rico) to the comparatively obscure (Geek Gordon, anyone?).

Attempting an arrest leads to combat, which is resolved using Action cards. Special Combats representing Block Mania or an escaped alien add some additional flavour. Judges can join forces to try and arrest particularly tricky wrong 'uns, but this is a cop game not a co-op game, with the slightly incongruous aim being to beat your fellow Judges.

Aside from the introduction of a new Specialist Judges deck (which grants players additional character-specific skills), some tweaks to the cards and refreshed art, this is basically identical to the original edition. It's undoubtedly a little dated in its game design, but it offers a good dose of nostalgic fun.

Will Salmon

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Blastermind
The SFX quiz

JAMES CAMERON

Dive into the depths as we test your knowledge of the King of the World

Quizmaster ***Nick Setchfield, Editor at large***

QUESTION 1

Seeing which movie convinced Cameron to quit his job as a truck driver and join the film industry?

QUESTION 2

Cameron played himself in comedy series *Entourage*. In the show, which superhero did he bring to the big screen?

QUESTION 3

In 2012, Cameron became the first person to make a solo descent to which geographical feature?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question

Name this actress and the Cameron-related TV series.

QUESTION 5

Which star publically disowned 1989's *The Abyss*, saying "I'm never talking about it and never will"?

QUESTION 6

Cameron co-wrote and produced which 1995 cyberpunk thriller directed by his former wife Kathryn Bigelow?

QUESTION 7

What's the name of the colony on LV-426 investigated by the marines in *Aliens*?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question

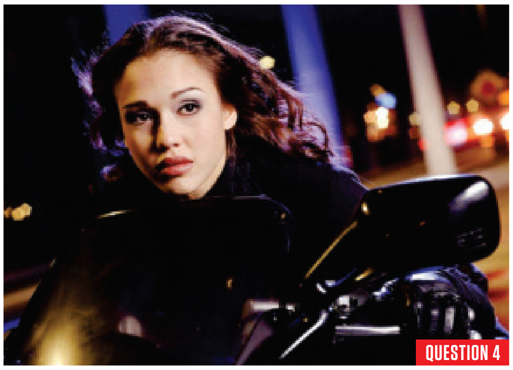
Cameron was production designer on this Roger Corman production. Name it.

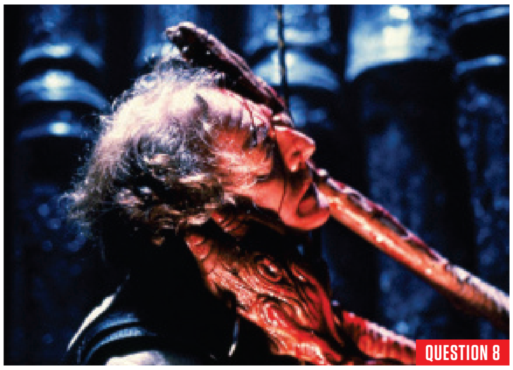
QUESTION 9

Which episode of *The Outer Limits*, written by Harlan Ellison, featured in a plagiarism case against *The Terminator*?

QUESTION 10

In *Avatar*, what substance mined on Pandora makes the moon so financially desirable?


QUESTION 4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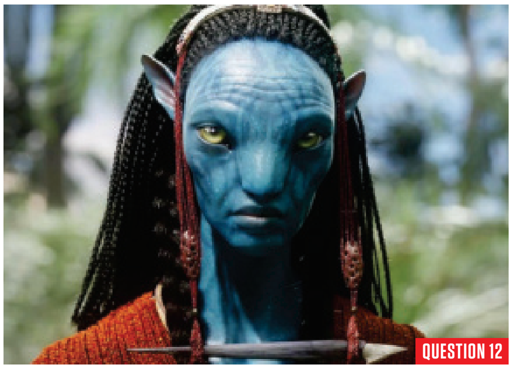
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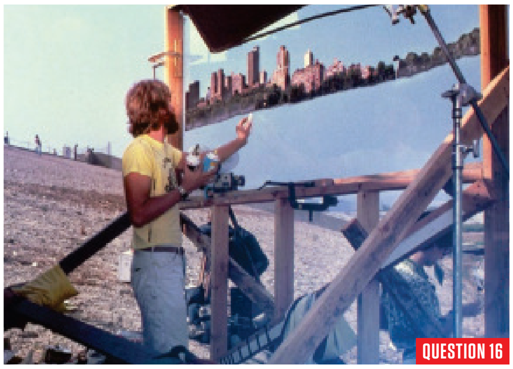
QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11

Cameron wrote a draft of which 1988 SF classic, whose screenplay was credited to Rockne S O'Bannon?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question

Name the actor transformed by motion capture here.

QUESTION 13

Cameron directed 1982's *Piranha II*, but who helmed the original 1978 movie?

QUESTION 14

Piranha II had the subtitle *The Spawning* for its US release, but how was it known internationally?

QUESTION 15

Which Guns N' Roses song was on the *Terminator 2* soundtrack?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question

Which dystopian adventure did Cameron create this glass shot for?

QUESTION 17

Orion Studios wanted which latterly notorious US celebrity to play the T-800 in *The Terminator*?

QUESTION 18

Cameron wrote and produced 2019's manga adaptation *Alita: Battle Angel* – but who directed it?

QUESTION 19

What was the title of the Cameron-directed *Terminator* attraction staged at Universal Studios?

QUESTION 20

Which actor links *The Terminator*, *Aliens* and *The Abyss*?

Answers

1 *Star Wars* 2 Aquaman 3 The Mariana Trench 4 Jessica Alba, *Dark Angel* 5 Ed Harris 6 *Strange Days* 7 Hadley's Hope 8 *Galaxy Of Terror* 9 "Soldier" 10 Unobtanium 11 *Alien Nation* 12 CCH Pounder 13 Joe Dante 14 *Piranha II: Flying Killers* 15 "You Could Be Mine" 16 *Escape From New York* 17 OJ Simpson 18 Robert Rodriguez 19 T2-3D: Battle Across Time 20 Michael Biehn

How did you do?

Rate yourself by King Jim

0-5	King Cone
6-10	King-size bed
11-15	King Kong
16-19	King of the hill
20	King of the World

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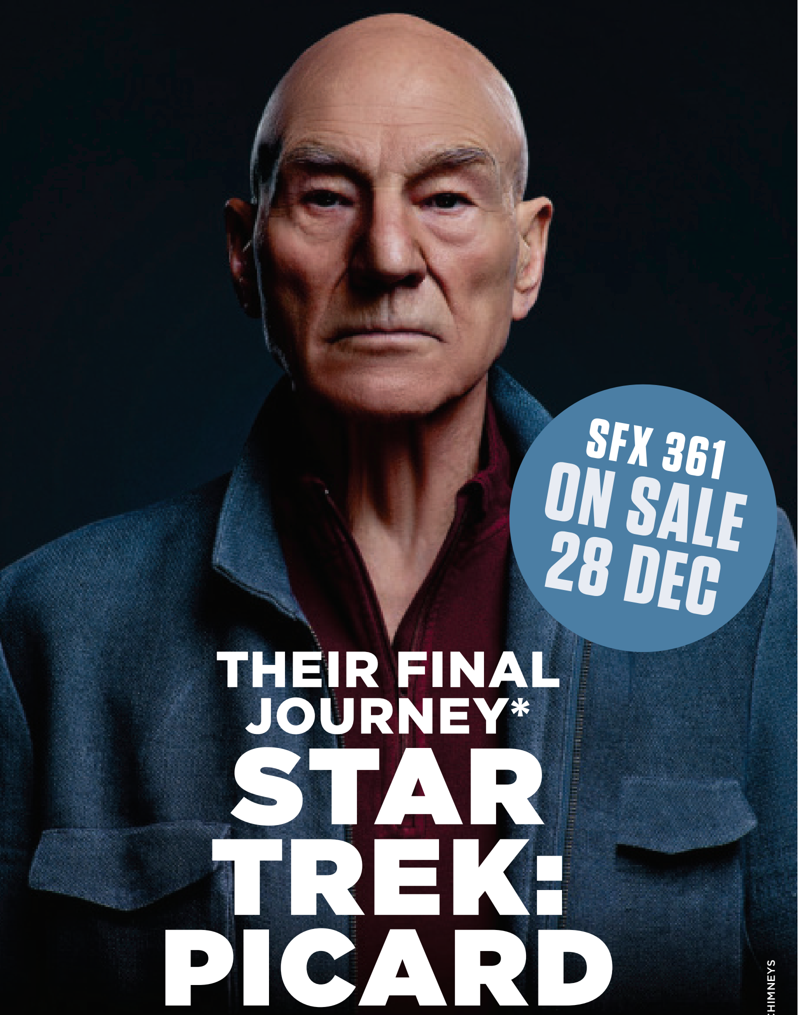
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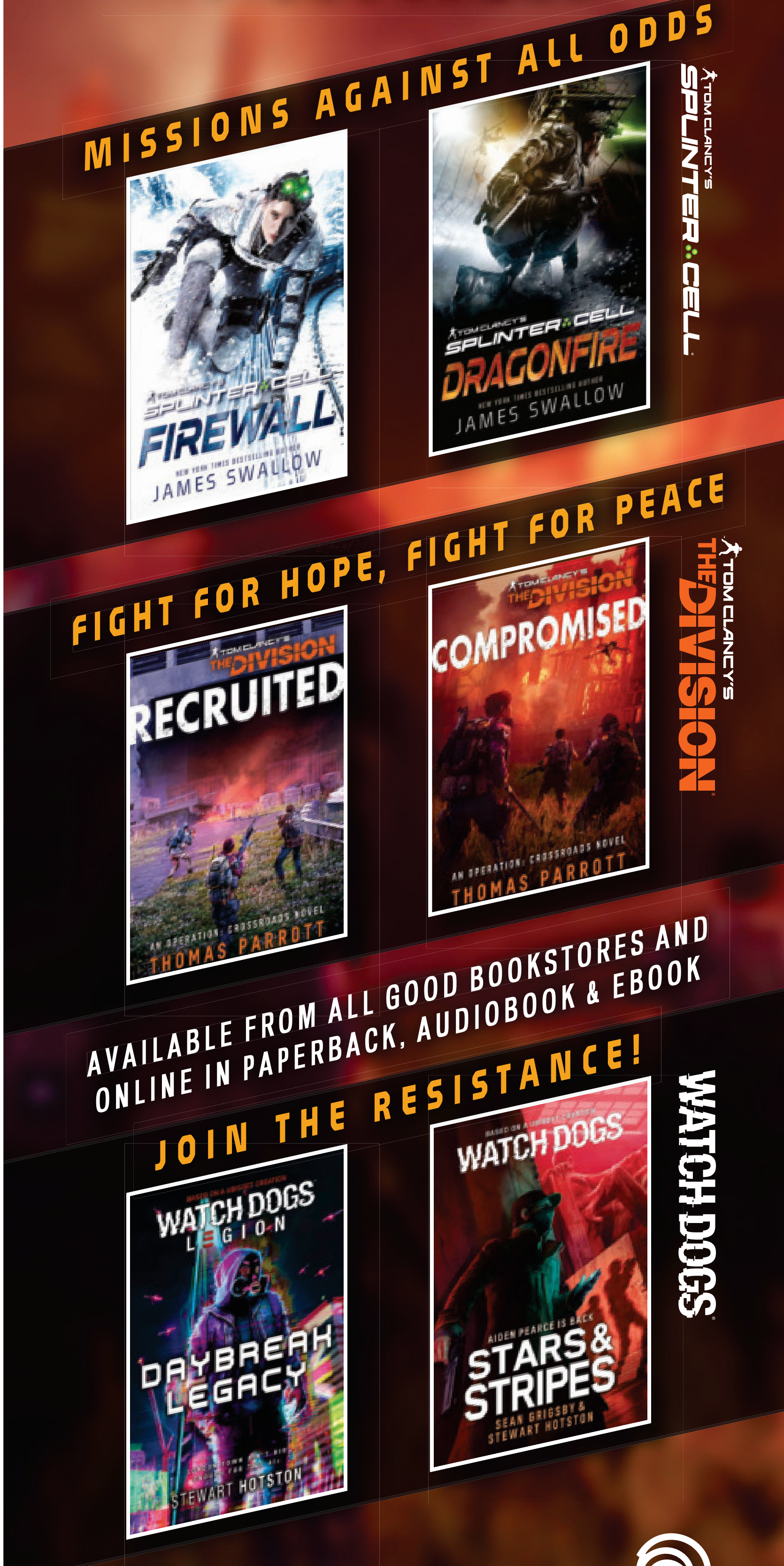
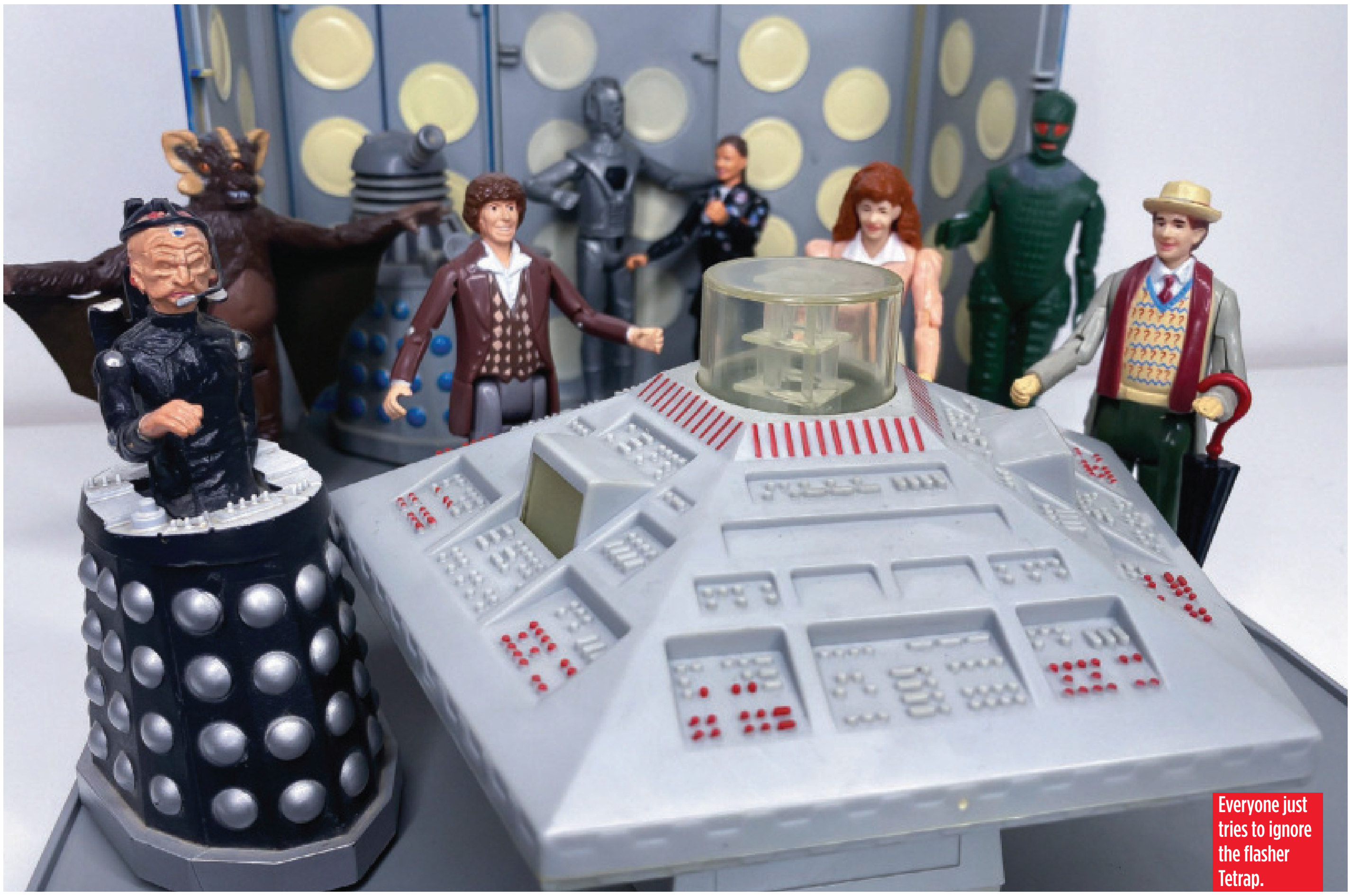

TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL FIREWALL
JAMES SWALLOW
TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL DRAGONFIRE
JAMES SWALLOW
TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL
TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION RECRUITED
AN OPERATION: CROSSROADS NOVEL
THOMAS PARROTT
TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION COMPROMISED
AN OPERATION: CROSSROADS NOVEL
THOMAS PARROTT
TOM CLANCY'S THE DIVISION
WATCH DOGS LEGION
DAYBREAK LEGACY
STEWART HOTSTON
WATCH DOGS
STARS & STRIPES
SEAN GRIGSBY & STEWART HOTSTON
WATCH DOGS
ACONYTE
UBISOFT

Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



Everyone just tries to ignore the flasher Tetrap.

Dapol Figures

Darren Scott, Editor

It was late 1987 when a line in *Doctor Who Magazine* caught my eye. "Oh, and keep a look out for (a mere 25 years late) some proper plastic 6" toy figures (like the *Star Wars* ones) from Kenner Toys," wrote Gary Russell, in a Merchandise Report.

These figures, later revealed to be produced by model train manufacturer Dapol, were certainly plastic and somewhat like the *Star Wars* ones in size initially, though far from proper... But at last! I'd been a *Doctor Who* fan my whole life and had *always* wanted figures. They do say be careful what you wish for...

For my birthday in 1988 I was given the TARDIS and the Seventh Doctor. Five days later, on some other dude's birthday [that would be Our Lord Jesus Christ – Calendar Ed], I was given the then other three figures in the set for Christmas: Mel, K-9 and a Tetrap.

Kate McCrae from Mego's *The Black Hole* range became a substitute Mel for those five days – when it was revealed she was an alien impostor, she fell down the back of the tumble dryer, never to be seen again. In my defence, I thought she'd be retrievable. I worried for weeks that she'd cause it to break down.

Faulty TARDIS lights, five-sided consoles, a two-armed Davros, a miscoloured K-9, a Fourth Doctor with no scarf, an anorexic Cyberman and an Ice Warrior with a laser rifle... the loveable yet flawed range continued to add new players. I knew things were starting to go wrong when, at first glance, I mistook the Ace figure in a *DWM* advert for the Brigadier.

With two younger brothers we were lucky enough to have a vast collection of toys across all the '80s franchises. The GI Joe Mobile Command Centre – I know, how butch! – became a returning set that substituted for "The Robots Of Death"'s Storm Mine 4, where size-appropriate creatures from other toy ranges would stalk the halls. My Nana made me a version of *DWM*'s shape-changing penguin companion Frobisher out of Fimo.

Ironically these came out just at the tail end of my time for playing with action figures. My toy-playing days may have been over, but collecting items kept in the packaging began. But that is a whole other story...

Darren still can't believe Dapol didn't just repackage Pink Mel as the Rani.

Fact Attack!

- → **There were over 250 Dapol products (including variations), according to richardwho.co.uk's extensive Dapol Project.**
- → **Prototype figures of the First Doctor, a Yeti and Cybermat were made but never actually went into production.**
- → **There were also plans, and a prototype which was photographed, for a playset of the Third Doctor's Whomobile vehicle.**
- → **The original K-9 toy was green, not grey, due to Dapol misjudging the colour on a BBC photograph of the prop. Insufficient data!**
- → **Dapol were the first company to make a TARDIS toy with sound effects. Though, as you'd expect, it didn't *quite* sound right...**

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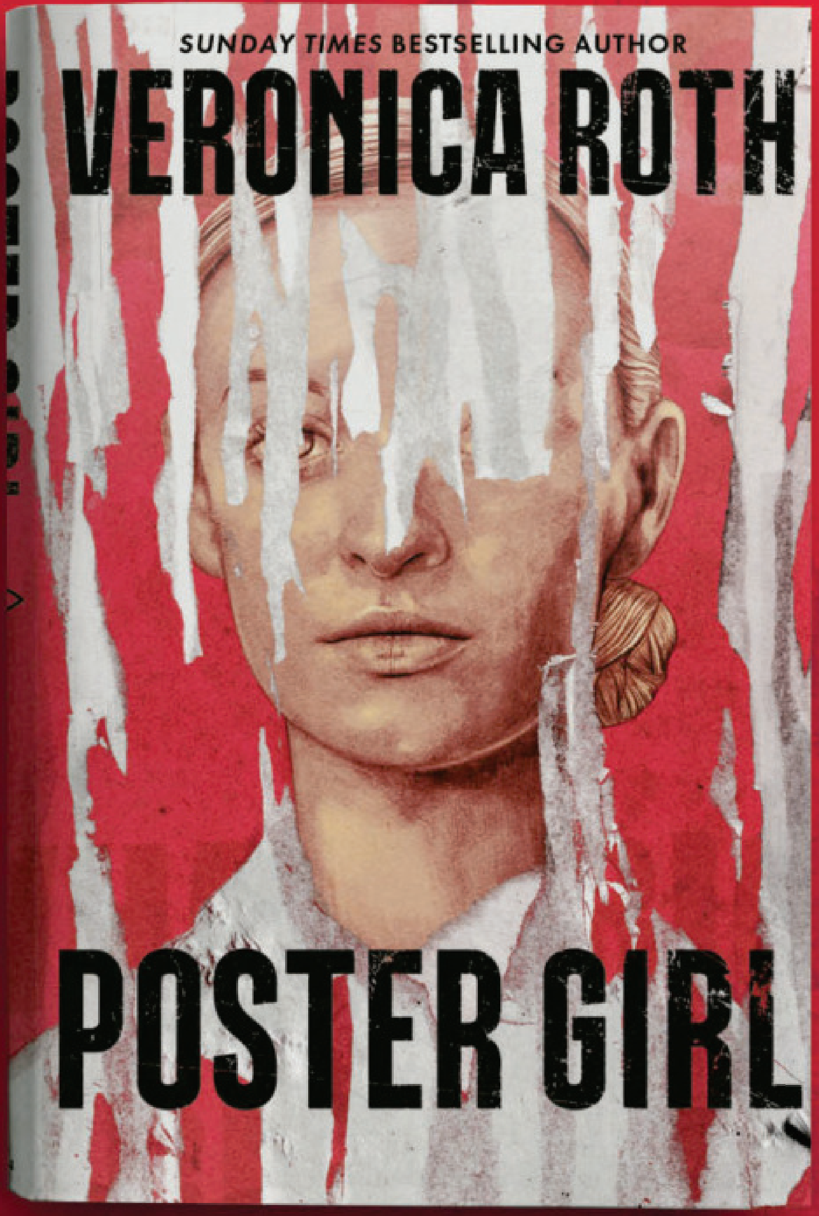
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